



by Judy Fleming, HCMG

Medicinal Plants: Comfrey

My second favorite medicinal plant in my garden is comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*), more popularly known as knitbone. Comfrey is a perennial plant that will be happy in a corner of your garden for many years. It needs about a three foot square and enjoys both full and partial sun. The fuzzy leaves grow up to 10 inches long and the small drooping purple flowers are produced throughout the summer. It is a heavy nitrogen feeder and should be fertilized after harvesting the leaves. Harvested leaves may be used for poultices or comfrey tea also makes an excellent organic fertilizer for the garden.



Comfrey contains substances that help skin regenerate, including allantoin, rosmarinic acid, and tannins, and is used to treat wounds and reduce the inflammation associated with sprains and broken bones. The roots and leaves contain allantoin, a substance that helps new skin cells grow, along with other substances that reduce inflammation and keep skin healthy. Comfrey ointments and poultices were often applied to the surface of the skin to heal bruises as well as pulled muscles and ligaments, fractures, sprains, strains, and osteoarthritis.

Historically, comfrey was also used to treat gastrointestinal illness. However, the herb contains dangerous substances called pyrrolizidine alkaloids that are highly toxic to the liver and can cause death. In July 2001, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration required that dietary supplement manufacturers immediately remove all oral comfrey products from the market.

Comfrey preparations are made from the leaves or other parts of the plant grown above the ground. New leaves tend to have more pyrrolizidine alkaloids than older leaves. Harvest the older leaves and make an infusion by placing 2 leaves in 2 cups of water and simmer down to 1 cup of liquid. Soak a cloth in this liquid to be used as a poultice, or mix the liquid with some french green clay and apply to the skin to reduce itching and irritation. Remove the poultice or clay after 30 minutes and wash with clean warm water. Alternately, comfrey is excellent for the compost pile and makes a wonderful "compost tea" for the garden.

Precautions:

Oral comfrey products have been banned in the U.S. and many European countries, but topical preparations are still available. Never take comfrey by mouth. Severe liver poisoning and even death may occur.

Use only small amounts of comfrey-containing creams for no longer than 10 days at a time.

Never give a child comfrey by mouth, and do not apply creams or ointments containing comfrey to a child's skin.

Do not use comfrey if you have liver disease, alcoholism, or cancer. Children, the elderly, and pregnant or breastfeeding women should not use comfrey products — either orally or topically — under any circumstances.