



by Judy Fleming, HCMG

Medicinal Plants: Purple Coneflower

Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*, *Echinacea angustifolia*, *Echinacea pallida*) has traditionally been used to treat or prevent colds, flu, and other infections. It is believed to enhance the activity of the immune system, relieve pain, reduce inflammation, and have hormonal, antiviral, and antioxidant effects. Less commonly, echinacea has been used for wounds and skin problems, such as acne or boils. Archeological digs discovered that Native Americans used echinacea for more than 400 years to treat infections and wounds and as a general "cure-all." Throughout history people have used echinacea to treat scarlet fever, malaria, blood poisoning, and diphtheria. Its use in the United States declined after the introduction of antibiotics; however, in Germany, its use is widespread.

All parts of the plant may be used in infusions, teas and tinctures, but it is commonly thought that the above ground part of the plant provides more enhancements to the immune system. The chemicals in echinacea that play a therapeutic role are polysaccharides, glycoproteins, alkamides, volatile oils, and flavonoids. In Germany (where herbs are regulated by the government), the above ground parts of *Echinacea purpurea* are approved to treat colds, upper respiratory tract infections, urinary tract infections, and slow healing wounds.

Professional herbalists also recommend echinacea to treat vaginal yeast (candida) infections, ear infections (also known as otitis media), athlete's foot, sinusitis, hay fever (also called allergic rhinitis).

An adult may use echinacea for general immune system enhancement in the following forms and take 3 times a day generally for 7 - 10 days:

- Tea - 1 Tbl of dried root & flower head
- Tincture extract 2 - 3 mL (20 - 90 drops)
- Powdered extract - 300 mg
- Stabilized fresh extract: 0.75 mL (15 - 23 drops)

People with tuberculosis, leukemia, diabetes, connective tissue disorders, multiple sclerosis, HIV or AIDS, any autoimmune diseases, or, possibly, liver disorders should not take echinacea. There is some concern that echinacea may reduce the effectiveness of medications that suppress the immune system. For this reason, people receiving organ transplants who must take immunosuppressant medications should avoid this herb. People with allergies to the daisy family should not take echinacea. When taken by mouth, echinacea may cause temporary numbing and tingling on the tongue.



The good news for gardeners is that echinacea is not only useful; it's also a beautiful and hardy addition to your perennial beds and borders. The only thing echinacea can be somewhat fussy about is too much moisture. It likes a fairly dry soil, and should never have to sit very long with its roots in wet, soggy soil. They self sow as long as you leave a few of the last flowers to dry up naturally. When weeding the garden in spring, watch for tiny coneflower seedlings. You can also harvest the seeds to use next year by choose a few fully mature and ripened flower heads, and cut them, leaving a nice long stem. Hang the flowers upside down with the flower heads enclosed in paper bags.

Sources: *Botanical.com*; <http://www.gardenguides.com>; and *National Center for Complimentary and Alternative Medicine*