

# COMFREY



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Comfrey is a medicinal plant and is also grown to feed animals. In England, it feeds race horses and zoo animals such as giraffes who need a lot of vegetarian protein.

## History of Comfrey

An early documentation of the use of comfrey appeared in the herbal of Dioscorides, an ancient Greek Botanic physician who travelled with the army of Alexander the Great on his campaigns to conquer the known world. Dioscorides mentions the native European species of *Symphytum*. This is the wild comfrey that has been known to herbalists for over 2000 years. It's usually called, *Symphytum Officinale*. "Symphytum" comes from the Greek "syumphuo," meaning "to make grow together." The term "Officinale" referred to the Latin *Officina*, which was the early monastery storeroom for botanical drugs; a pharmacy. Later the name *officinale* was added to Latin names of herbs kept in an apothecary's shop.



## The reference here is to the ability of comfrey to knit flesh together.

One of the main constituents of comfrey is allantoin, which is a specific cell proliferant. It has the property of multiplying healthy cells and not malignant cells.

The ancient form of comfrey was a small plant which grew in high, rocky places. It was used to treat wounds and fractures. During the middle ages, comfrey was used as a medicine and several references to comfrey appear in the herbals and *materia medica* of the day.

Early monks grew comfrey in monastery gardens and distributed it to the sick people of the village for bronchial disorders and injuries.

In 1568 Comfrey was mentioned in Turner's Herbal. The roots were used as a tea for those who would spit blood. They were also known for gluing together fresh wounds. Gerard's Herbal also includes comfrey, for those who spit blood and have inward wounds and burstings.

Comfrey is one of the patriarchal herbs that I believe harkens back to the Garden of Eden. The Creator placed it on the Earth knowing that the human race was going to make a rough time of it and would need a universal salve for the wounds of war and accident.

We speak above of the native European comfrey. It was a wild variety that grew in ditches and watersides and moist fields. The Russian comfrey that was later used for fodder was a cultivated variety which was less prickly. Nicholas Culpeper, an eighteenth century herbalist, spoke of native comfrey as being so prickly that it caused the tender parts of the face, hands, or body to itch when touched by the leaves. Culpeper was an herbalist who studied from the old great German works on Medicine, Alchemy, and Astrology much to the chagrin of the regular medical powers that be. He married a woman with an independent income and was able to devote his entire life to the study of medical botany. He treated hundreds of poor people free of charge, so he had a lot of experience. Culpeper stated that comfrey came under the rule



of Saturn which was under the rule of Capricorn. This gave the herb the property of being cold, dry, and earthy. This means that it could be employed successfully to treat fresh wounds. That virtue would also make the herb effective in drying up the fluids from old ulcers and cankers, and stopping hemorrhage. Culpeper also used comfrey root for blood in the urine, to help congested people spit up phlegm from the lungs or the belly, for broken bones, hemorrhoids, sore breasts from an abundance of milk, and to cool and ease pain.

The Russian variety of comfrey was introduced into England by Joseph Busch between 1790 and 1801. He had taken a position as the head gardener at the palace of Catherine the Great at St. Petersburg, Russia. The Russians traditionally hired English or Scottish head gardeners until the late 1800's. Busch sent several comfrey plants home to England. Over the years, some of these were cultivated as ornamental plants. Comfrey was still recommended in the Royal Horticultural Dictionary of Gardening (1952) as a fine plant for the wild garden. In England, the wild garden is one that's for bees, birds and butterflies rather than man.

James Grant was the first to cultivate comfrey in England agriculturally as a crop for animal fodder. He increased the weight of the crops by constant cutting of the plants and stimulation of the roots with a water spray. By the mid 1800's, comfrey was being grown by the ton in England, Scotland, and Ireland. Some early records report a yield of as many as 31 tons to the acre.

Henry Doubleday (1813-1902) a Quaker who invented a postage stamp glue, was running out of a gum arabic for his formula. He came across an article on comfrey in the Royal Agricultural Society's Journal of 1871. It contained the word, "mucilaginous", which led him to believe that the plant could be used in the manufacture of glue. He sent away to the gardener at St. Petersburg for some comfrey plants. The current gardener didn't want to disturb the large border of comfrey plants in the garden, so he sent Doubleday some chance seedlings found between the rows of the established perennials. These were the F 1 hybrids which came about by combining or (cross-pollination) of two pure strains: Comfrey from the Caucasus and the native European comfrey. This strain proved to be very hardy and yielded from 100 to 120 tons per acre. Doubleday fed the comfrey to his three cows and a pony. He harvested about 160 pounds each day. The new hybrid went over better with the animals and bore several cuttings a year. In England, it was used for winter fodder. Henry spent the last years of his life growing comfrey for his dream to feed a hungry world. After he experienced the pangs of the Irish Potato Famine, he wanted to find a crop that would help mankind.

## You could actually live on comfrey.

NUTRITIONAL PROFILE						
(calculated on a zero moisture basis per 100 gm)						
Comfrey leaf						
	very low	low	ave	high	very high	
Aluminum						23.7 mg
Ash (total)						3.6 %
Calcium						1,800 mg
Calories						0.6 /gm
Carbohydrates						75.9 %
Chromium						0.18 mg
Cobalt						trace mg
Crude Fiber						9 %
Dietary Fiber						48 %
Fat						1.2 %
Iron						1.2 mg
Magnesium						70 mg
Manganese						0.58 mg
Niacin						8.9 mg
Phosphorus						220 mg
Potassium						1,700 mg
Protein						14 %
Riboflavin						0.72 mg
Selenium						0.12 mg
Silicon						0.90 mg
Sodium						11.0 mg
Thiamine						0.22 mg
Tin						0.67 mg
Vitamin A						18,000 IU
Vitamin C						80 mg
Zinc						trace mg

It is high in protein and calcium. According to Hills, "Comfrey is the fastest known builder of vegetable protein. (The amount of protein obtained from every acre of comfrey can be nearly twenty times that obtained from soybeans)." It is one of the few plants that can extract vitamin B-12 from the soil. It's high in vitamin A as well. Many other B vitamins are also contained in comfrey. In fact, there is research going on right now which considers comfrey (especially a comfrey product high in protein similar to miso, the soybean paste used to make broth, etc.) as a possible answer to feed starving nations. A Mr. Teas in the State of Washington, was experimenting with this idea. He is a farmer.

Unfortunately he experienced a shortage of labor and went to repairing farm machinery for a living. The dark, thick paste was developed by him before he changed his occupation. According to Hills, "His substance would probably be easiest to develop as a poultry food, entirely replacing fish meal, especially for turkeys, and a dog and cat food in the U.S.A. where the protein that should stay in hungry countries to feed children goes to produce one-ninth as much food in 'finger-lickin' good fried chicken. This lies far ahead at the end of a long road of research, far beyond the capacity of a genius in a garden shed."

We have often suggested using fresh comfrey in a salad with other fresh, green vegetables. When a transportation strike occurs and folks will not be able to obtain some of the "foods" we are accustomed to eating, comfrey may save lives. It should be grown in every garden. It is a must. A wonderful drink can be made in a blender with fresh comfrey, pineapple juice, and a little fresh peppermint. This is nourishing as well as healing. A person suffering from asthma, chronic or acute, can be relieved by this drink. During the winter, dried comfrey may be made into a tea. We will talk more about garden cultivation of comfrey later.

Here is an entry from Sir John Hill's Family Herbal, a volume published in England in the 1800's.



## “COMFREY”

“A common wild plant of great virtue; it is frequent by ditch sides, it grows a foot and half high, the leaves are large, long, not very broad, rough to the touch, and of a deep disagreeable green; the stalks are green; thick, angulated, and upright. The flowers grow along the tops of the branches and are white, sometimes reddish, not very large, and hang often downwards. The root is thick, black, and irregular; when broken it is found to be white within, and full of a slimy juice. The root is the part used, and it is best fresh, but it may be beat up into a conserve with three times its weight in sugar.\* It is a remedy for that terrible disease the whites. It is also good against spitting of blood, bloody fluxes, and purgings, and for inward bruises.”



\*Because of the high processing involved in making sugar, we would recommend using honey instead.

Samuel Thomson, a nineteenth century botanic physician was, as far as our research has taken us, the earliest recorder of the use of comfrey in American Herbal Literature. His autobiography records an event that occurred when Thomson was about nine years old. He had injured his foot on a piece of farm machinery. The wound was slow to heal and although his family used the remedies made available to them from both the regular physician and the herb and root doctor, the wound grew worse--almost to the point where the foot would have to be amputated if it didn't heal. Samuel Thomson asked his father to obtain some comfrey that was growing in an abandoned encampment left by some German soldiers during the latter half of the 18th century. The soldiers were probably mercenaries left over from the revolutionary or the French and Indian War, the manuscript doesn't say. Improvement to the wound and eventual healing came after several comfrey poultices were applied to the foot. Oddly enough, comfrey was not part of Thomson's patented system of medicine. We do not hear of it until the latter part of the 19th century where it was included in the U.S. Pharmacopoeia. It seems to have been introduced by way of France. The main ingredient in comfrey during the early, times was said to be mucilage. Mucilage was contained in the root in a large quantity. This, the 19th century pharmacists figured, was the main ingredient in comfrey that healed wounds. Allantoin was not yet isolated. In ancient times, it was well and good for comfrey to heal all by itself. But after the advent of inorganic minerals for medicine, pharmacists tried to synthesize the active ingredients of plants in order to "improve upon nature." Many of the late 19th and 20th century doctors felt that it was unsophisticated to use crude plants in their treatments. Many of the good old trusted herbal remedies were abandoned for chemical extracts of active principles of plants or synthesized versions of what chemists thought the healing element of a plant to be. We have always believed in using a plant in its wholesome state. Valerian root, for example, can be given to an infant without the side effects that would occur if that same infant was given the popular drug, Valium. Valium is the synthetic version of the active principle found in Valerian root. When one element in an herb is isolated and extracted, the remaining substance often becomes a deadly poison.

Dr. Charles MacAllister, M.D., was interested in the use of comfrey as a healing agent. He had written a paper in the 1896 edition of the British Surgical Journal, Lancet. In it, he gave his philosophy concerning the bloodstream and irregular cell growth. Dr. MacAllister wanted to look up his paper and noticed an article in the same issue by a Professor William Thompson, President of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. Thompson recorded a case of a man who had been diagnosed as having a malignant tumor on his face. The patient had undergone surgery of the palate in an attempt to remove the cancer.

A month later, the cancer returned. This time it ran rampant throughout the patient's head. They gave up on cutting it out. It had gone too far, and they sent him home. Three months later he returned to Thompson's office and was examined. Thompson noted that the cancer had completely disappeared. The patient told Dr. Thompson that he had been applying comfrey poultices to the swelling and that it had gradually disappeared. The patient had a custom-made palate to fill in the hole left by surgery of the hard palate. Thompson states in the report that although he knows nothing of the use of comfrey, he does not believe that it would remove a sarcomatous tumor.

MacAllister was inspired by that article of Dr. Thompsons and began to wonder if there was actually anything in comfrey that would control or stabilize cell growth. He began an extensive study of comfrey although he had never before heard of its use as a medicine. Beginning with old books on materia medica (substances used medicinally), MacAllister found that after the mid-nineteenth century, comfrey or *Symphytum* was referred to as obsolete as a healing aid. He then began to search through the ancient and medieval herbals which told the history of the use of comfrey. There were several varieties of the plant used, one was known to Turks and Saracens for use in healing battle wounds.

Many of the early references investigated by Dr. MacAllister spoke of comfrey as a healer of wounds and ulcers, and a knitter of flesh, sinew, and bone. Local rural people often held comfrey in high esteem. This led him to try to find out why comfrey was so useful. He obtained many plants and took them to the head of the Organic Chemistry Department at Liverpool University. A white crystalline substance similar to one oxidized from a nitrogen compound, uric acid, was obtained. This substance, allantoin, is found in the transfer of blood from the mother to the fetus when the blood passes through the allantois. The allantois grows smaller as the pregnancy progresses and the amount of allantoin decreases. The substance allantoin is also present in mother's milk (0.006%) and is obviously necessary in some way for the growth of the baby. It seems to play a role in metabolism of growth and development. Wheat embryos, beet juice, french beans, and green peas contain allantoin.

The rhizome of comfrey contains 0.6 to 0.8% allantoin during the months of January to March, before the plant increases in growth. The amount of allantoin in the rhizome decreases to about 0.4% a few months later and in July when comfrey is fully grown, there is almost no allantoin in the rhizome, but in the young shoots and the buds. So, the best time to collect the most medicinally active comfrey rhizome is during the dormant months.

It has long been known that certain types of maggots will clean up a wound. In an American magazine, *Drug Trade News*, (April 29, 1935), it was reported by U.S.D.A. entomologists (insect experts) and Dr. William Robinson, Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine, that the maggots give off allantoin. The article also mentioned that when sterile maggots could not be obtained by surgeons, allantoin could be used.

Getting back to Dr. MacAllister's story, we find that he has been experimenting with a solution of allantoin (0.4%; this is two grains to the ounce of distilled water), on external ulcers of his patients. There was remarkable improvement and rapid healing of even old wounds. Success was also seen in cases of respiratory disorders. Sometimes MacAllister also used decoctions of comfrey either alone or with a little allantoin solution added. The results of Dr. MacAllister's experiments were reported in the *British Medical Journal* (Jan. 6 and Sept. 21, 1912). Between 1914 and 1935, MacAllister continued to experiment with comfrey finding successful healthy cell proliferation even with plants treated with *symphytum* solution and allantoin solution. He was truly a man of insight, a seeker of truth, willing to investigate with an open mind that which he did not know. He says this, "Practical experience tells us that synthetic allantoin is an active agent, but the question arises as to whether the natural form found in the allantois, in (Mother's) milk, and in various vegetable structures, may not possess virtues superior to those of its synthetic isomer." There are, of course, companion elements in herbs that influence therapeutic action of an active principle of a botanical in

the human body. One reason that isolates may not always function as healers is because the missing elements such as vitamins or endocrine are not supplied either by the substance or the body. These things may act as a catalyst to bring about a balance of elements in the body which are necessary in a state of health.

Here is an interesting case reported in the British Medical Journal (June 8, 1912) by Dr. Charles Searle, of Cambridge, England:

“The patient was a man aged 83, first seen on 23 October, 1911. He suffered from shortness of breath, and swelling of the legs on which there were some ulcers due to neglect. For some months, this condition was very grave; he had marked arteriosclerosis, a loud aortic systolic murmur, with a feeble pulse and low temperature. The urine contained blood, albumen, and casts, but no sugar.

During December 1911, a fungating ulcer appeared on the dorsum of the left foot. It rapidly spread, and eventually exposed the metatarsal bones. In January, 1912, the patient's condition appeared to be hopeless, he became at times delirious, and was removed home to die. He was then treated with four-hourly fomentations made with decoction of comfrey root. The ulcer immediately began to fill up rapidly and was practically healed by the end of April, and the patient's condition made corresponding improvement.”

Dr. Shook, one of my teachers, used comfrey in a formula for all chronic, purulent (characterized by the formation of pus) and dyscrasia (abnormal blood condition) diseases. He states that comfrey contains mucilage, tannin, phosphates of sodium, potassium, and calcium, arantoin, iron, and a little starch. Shook sees comfrey as a demulcent, nutrient, astringent, expectorant, hemostatic, cell proliferant, and vulnerary. He used it for ulcers, cancers, hemorrhage, wounds, torn ligaments, ruptures and broken bones. Comfrey was also used by Dr. Shook for bronchitis, coughs, asthma, and other respiratory disorders.

The Peoples Desk Reference, by Joseph Montagna, (Lake Oswego; Quest for Truth Publications, 1981) suggests using comfrey for gunshot wounds. It's something that would have come in handy for Doc Holliday at the O.K. Corral; Doc Adams could have used it in Gunsmoke as well.

We have had considerable success with comfrey in our practice of over 40 years. The plant has been used for asthma, cuts, bruises, burns and wounds of many types.

The Comfrey Burn Paste is made with equal parts of comfrey leaf or powder, wheat germ oil and honey. It is applied directly to the wound or burn and more is added to the skin when the original is absorbed. There is no need to remove the original application when adding more of the mixture. We have many wonderful success stories about using the comfrey burn paste.

Most recently, one of our school of Natural Healing staff members (we call him “Professor Cayenne”) accidentally scalded his hand with burning olive oil during a kitchen fire. He acquired Third Degree burns from this misfortune. There was no one around to properly dress the wound, so he went to the local emergency room to have the toasted, dead flesh cut away. They cleaned the burn and informed him that he would need skin grafting if he wished to regain the use of his hand. He said, “No, thank you. Not unless there is a donor for the skin. I don't want flesh cut from anywhere on my body!” The hospital assured him that the skin grafting was the only route to go. He still refused. But when he got home, he asked a friend to 1) take pictures of the hand for documentation, and 2) make up the comfrey burn paste and apply it to the hand. After a few weeks of using the comfrey paste, he was able to move his hand. The hand is still scarred somewhat, but new flesh has grown in and he has total use of the hand. With dry skin

brushing and use of the Cayenne and BF & C Ointments, he began improving the circulation as soon as the skin grew back. The comfrey paste had turned an almost mummified-looking hand to one that is now living again.

I was scheduled to lecture in California a few years ago and the lecture was to be held near San Jose, where some of my relatives were living at the time. On the way to meet me at the airport, the car in which a little 5 year old nephew was riding in, met with an accident. The car door opened and the boy was dragged along the asphalt and his fingers were scraped to stubs--past the nail and down to the top knuckle. His family worked with the comfrey burn paste on the little guy's hand and within a few months, I saw him again. He ran up to me and said, "Uncle Ray! Look, my fingers have grown back! Even the nails!" We'll, folks, this is one of the miracles of healing for which the good Lord has left the plans and specifications for the regeneration of the body. And if we use the remedies that have been left for us, we can incorporate these miracles into our everyday wisdom.

A very sad case comes to mind. Two 9 year old boys were playing with gasoline and matches. They burned their hands beyond all recognition. Both families went to the hospital emergency ward where they were informed that the only way to help these boys was to do a series of costly operations on them (about \$10,000 worth) and the best they could do was leave the boys with claw-like projections for hands. One family agreed to do that and the other told the hospital, "Wait, we would like to try something else first." They took their boy out of the emergency room and called me. We used the comfrey burn paste on the boy and he showed improvement in a few weeks; his hands were eventually restored.

Our Bone, Flesh and Cartilage formula has comfrey as a base. It is available to use as a fomentation or an ointment. It is to be used wherever there is any injury to bones, flesh, or cartilage. It penetrates through the skin, muscle and even reconstructs bone that has disintegrated from disease when properly used. (See our booklet, Dr. Christopher~Three Day Cleansing Program and Mucusless Diet for more details. Also, the newsletter on "Arthritis" and The Incurables booklet explain its use.)



Comfrey is also a part of the herbal antiseptic healing tincture for wounds, sore throats, toothaches, bruises, etc. Comfrey is included in the respiratory formula compounded according to my specifications.

One of our students used a combination of comfrey root powder, oak bark powder, and cayenne to stop hemorrhaging from the mouth in a child who had seven healthy molars pulled out in one day. Her mother was told by the dentist that this was normal procedure before braces. When they arrived home, the mother couldn't stop the bleeding from the child's mouth. 1 1/2 inch gauze pads were dipped in water, folded and then dipped in the combined herbal powders. These were placed between the bleeding gums and held there. They were changed about three times in 20 minutes. Shepherd's purse tea was given through a straw. Healing was rapid.

## Garden Cultivation of Comfrey

Comfrey, as it exists in America today, can be grown easily in your own yard. It is propagated by root cuttings, not by seed. The plants we have today are very hearty and will take to most soils unless they are extremely rocky or desert-like. Plant the rootstock in the spring. Comfrey leaves can be harvested from April to September. As mentioned, in the discussion of Dr. MacAllister, the roots contain the most allantoin from January through March.

Comfrey requires no special care. It is an adaptable plant that puts down deep roots. Although it will flourish with minimum cultivation, it does like sunlight and water. We also advise you to cut back the flowers so the plants will bush out rather than grow up tall and spindly. This will give you a good crop of leaves. Comfrey is a perennial so it will come back every year without replanting. Old comfrey leaves are high in potassium so you could use them for compost.

A Salt Lake comfrey grower states that she collects comfrey leaves between 5 and 6 in the evening when the healing properties are most concentrated. Another friend has a comfrey plant growing near her porch. She waters it and picks the leaves. She didn't plant it there, it just appeared one year as a volunteer, and it is very proliferant. Lawrence D. Hills gives the most specific information for growth of comfrey on a large scale. There may also be information on cultivation in the U.S. Department of Agriculture publications.

A wonderful plant such as comfrey should be grown in every garden. During the summer, it can provide the family with the nutritious and refreshing "green drinks" that can prevent and cure illness.

Comfrey is a member of the natural order, Boraginaceae, The Borage Family. It's common names are comfrey, knitbone, bruise-wort, wound wort, gum plant, healing herb, and slippery root. The plant is a perennial. The roots are black with whitish insides. There is a mucilaginous juice in the roots and the leaves.

"The stem is angular and hairy, bearing bristly, oblong lanceolate leaves, some petioled, and some sessile. There are large basal leaves which are tongue shaped and low to the ground. From May to August, the whitish or pale purple flowers grow in forked scorpioid racemes and have a tubular corolla resembling a glove finger." (Moulton, 1979, p. 92).