

ANOTHER HERB HERBERT FAVOURITE HERBS

FACT SHEET

Comfrey *Symphytum officinale*

DESCRIPTION

Perennial, native to Europe and Asia. Comfrey is a coarse, erect herb which grows to 1 metre from a thick, fleshy rootstock. The leaves are oblong-ovate to oblong-lanceolate in outline with a long petiole which reduces in length on the upper parts of the flower stems. The alternate leaves are decurrent at the base, that is, they grow as a thin, wing-like extension partly down the stem on either side below the point where the leaves join the stem. The stem itself is round with a small hole running through the centre. The leaves and stems are covered with short, stiff hairs giving the plant a prickly appearance. The flowers form alternately in a coiling, axillary raceme. They are up to 2 cm long, with a five-pointed green calyx and a 12 mm long tubular corolla with a five or occasionally six scalloped edge. The flowers may be white, yellowish, purple or rose in colour.

Another species of comfrey frequently found in gardens is Russian comfrey, *Symphytum x uplandicum*, which is a cross between common comfrey and the prickly comfrey (*S. asperum*) found in Russia. It grows to 1.75 metres and has rose-purple coloured corollas which are 2 cm long.

SIGNIFICANCE

Comfrey has been highly regarded as a healing herb from very early times and was mentioned as such in a herbal dating to the second century BC, only reproductions of which remained by the time of the botanist-historian Pliny in the first century AD. Even then comfrey's ability to heal wounds and unite bones was recognized. Later in history it gained the common names of 'knitbone' and 'boneset', further indications of the traditional belief in its power to help broken bones to mend. So effective was it, according to Culpeper, that if severed pieces of flesh were boiled with the herb they would join together again! Internally and externally, Culpeper stated, it helped lung and respiratory conditions, inflammations, wounds, sores, 'women's immoderate courses', gout, pains and aches and suchlike.

Comfrey has retained its reputation as a soothing and healing herb and has been used by medical herbalists for the treatment of slow-healing wounds and ulcers, bronchial conditions and broken bones. It contains allantoin, a cell proliferant, as well as tannins and mucilage, all of which are responsible for its therapeutic activity.

For the past 20 years comfrey has been treated as something of a miracle herb by many people with often excessive consumption of the plant as a tea or 'green drink'. During this time, scientific research has cast doubt on the safety of comfrey due to the presence in the root, and to a lesser extent in the leaves of several pyrrolizidine alkaloids (PAs), which are known to cause liver damage in animals and humans. PAs from comfrey and other plants, are believed to have a cumulative effect in the body which may not be recognized for many years after consumption has taken place. As a result, the cause of any liver damage may be difficult to pinpoint. This has led to a moratorium on the sale of comfrey products and its listing on poisons' schedules in a number of countries.

On the other hand, many medical herbalists counter that the connection between liver damage and comfrey is questionable in view of the inappropriate and excessive use of comfrey extracts in test procedures. They also point to positive effects that the allantoin from comfrey would have in preventing PA damage to the liver. Taken in an appropriate way i.e. in a standard dosage for a properly diagnosed ailment, they argue that the benefits of using comfrey far-



outweigh the perceived potential dangers.

Further research and study by both scientists and medical herbalists is proceeding to determine the safest and most appropriate response to the use of this herb.



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USE

In view of the current controversy on the safety of comfrey, if it is to be used medicinally, it should be restricted to the external treatment of skin conditions and suchlike. If, however, internal treatment is considered, this should only be undertaken in moderation and after consultation with a qualified medical herbalist who can determine any contradictions to its use. Comfrey is rich in many nutrients and trace elements which it draws from lower levels of the soil. It is, therefore, a valuable herb to add to an active compost heap—it is said to be a 'compost activator' itself—to use as a mulch on the garden, or to prepare as a fertilizer by leaving it to break down in a bucket of water for a week or so and using the resultant liquid.

CULTIVATION

Comfrey rarely sets seed and is usually propagated by root division. It will also grow from a leaf cutting though is not usually done. Each piece of root taken from comfrey will produce a new plant irrespective of whether or not the piece has a growth bud attached. This causes problems when cultivating this herb in that any piece left in the ground after harvesting will sprout and become a potential weed. It quickly overtakes surrounding plants if allowed to spread. Comfrey must, therefore, be planted in a permanent position where it is unlikely to compete for soil resources with other plants. Provided its root is not disturbed, however, it will remain under control.

Comfrey prefers slightly acidic, moist, fertile soil in a sunny or partially shaded position. In spite of its reputation as a troublesome weed species, comfrey can be eradicated from the garden during the growing season if all leaves are removed as they appear and the ground above the root heavily mulched.

Comfrey dies down in autumn, to return As the soil warms in spring.

