comfrey

materia medica

Prepared by Susan Williams
Foundations of Herbal Medicine
The Forager's Path School of Botanical Studies
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Botanical Name: Symphytum uplandica

Symphytum officianale

Common Name: Comfrey

Energetics: Cool, moist

Habitat and Growing Condition:

Moist meadows, ditches, and other moist places in the United States and Europe. It is successfully being grown in the Verde Valley by adding shade during the plant establishment period and daily watering. There are two know species of comfrey: wild comfrey, *Symphytum officianale*, a small plant that grows up to one meter tall and has yellow flowers, and *Symphytum uplandica*, a large plant that often grows more than two meters tall, with blue or purple flowers.[2]

Pertinent Information on the Plant:

Comfrey roots, like most perennial roots, does contain poison. In comfrey, this is pyrrolizidine alkaloids. Wild comfrey (officinale) leaves have some of the same poisons. But cultivated comfrey (uplandica) leaves don't contain pyrrolizidine alkaloids.[1]

Comfrey also contains allantoin, a substance that helps stimulate the growth of new cells. It is now used in many cosmetic products. Commercially prepared comfrey creams and ointments are useful for all kinds of skin irritations, including chafing and bug bites.

Although comfrey has a long history of being used internally, most herbalists are now much more cautious about taking comfrey internally, the pyrrolizidine alkaloids, are compounds believed to cause liver disease if taken over a long period of time. The American Herbal Products Association has recommended against selling comfrey products for internal use. Some traditional herbalists have responded with disbelief that traditional plants were the cause of disease in these cases. Paul Bergner provides an objective discussion regarding Pyrrolizidine alkaloids and their biochemical mechanism

of hepatotoxicity at http://medherb.com/Materia_Medica/Symphytum_-_Hepatotoxicity_of_pyrrolizidine_alkaloids_.htm[4]

Susun Weed, however, disputes this claim, stating that most all comfrey today is the *Symphytum uplandica* which is not believed to contain pyrrolizidine alkaloids.

Weed has an interesting discussion of her personal use of comfrey and her perspective at http://www.susunweed.com/herbal_ezine/June08/wisewoman.htm.

The FDA is investigating pyrrolizidine alkaloid levels in domestic comfrey. There are other less controversial herbs that can be used in its place, such as peppermint, balm, and ginger.[2]

For external use, comfrey ointments have been used to heal bruises as well as pulled muscles and ligaments, fractures, sprains, strains, and osteoarthritis. Comfrey contains substances that help skin regrow, including allantoin, rosmarinic acid, and tannins.[5] Kiva Rose also notes her successful experience with comfrey used in the reduction of swelling and trauma. Through her work, she found comfrey to be even more effective than liniments made with lobelia, cayenne, arnica, and mullein root in treating ligament injuries.[3]

Caution, however must be taken to not use comfrey on ANY open wound where even the slightest trace of infection is present. Comfrey assists the skin in healing quickly and closing over an existing infection could lead to a larger systemic infection.[3]

To summarize, modern scientific studies have found evidence to support comfrey's use in treating minor wounds and joint pain, but oral preparations of the plant have also been linked to liver damage and cancer. Taking comfrey by mouth is not recommended. One should also avoid using it on open wounds. [6]

Preparations:

Infused Oil: use any good quality oil, including olive or sunflower. A demonstration of making infused oil by Susun Weed is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRenHn7Krz0.

The oil can then be used as is, or in making salves or lotions.

Poultice Pulp: stir fresh, chopped rootstock into a little hot water to form a thick mash. Spread on a linen cloth and apply. The hot pulp of the rootstock makes a good external application for bronchitis, pneumonia, coughs, pleurisy, and for the pain, and inflammation of pulled tendons. Renew every 2-4 hours. [2]

Fertilizer: comfrey makes an excellent liquid fertilizer for garden and houseplants (allow leaves to decompose in a container of water). Add to the compost pile; use only wilted leaves, however, so they do not take root in the compost pile. [2]

References Used:

1 http://www.susunweed.com/herbal_ezine/June08/wisewoman.htm

2 http://medicinalherbinfo.org/herbs/Comfrey.html

3 http://bearmedicineherbals.com/choice-injury-herbs.html

4 http://medherb.com/Materia_Medica/Symphytum_-_Hepatotoxicity_of_pyrrolizidine_alkaloids_.htm

5 http://umm.edu/health/medical/altmed/herb/comfrey

6 http://www.healthline.com/health/what-is-comfrey#Risks3

7 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRenHn7Krz0