

Butterbur Root Profile

Also known as

Petasites hybridus, Lagwort, Plague-flower, Butterdock, Butterfly Dock, Butter-dock, Bog Rhubarb, Flapperdock, Umbrella leaves, and Bogshorns,

Introduction

Documentation for medicinal use of butterbur can be found as long ago as 100C.E. where the Greeks used it to relieve inflammation due to fever and headaches, as well as respiratory conditions. Butterbur root was used extensively during the Middle Ages, when it was suggested that mixing the powdered root with wine would help to cure the plague. During Colonial times, housewives often used the enormous leaves to wrap around butter to keep it cool and fresh. The plant is native to the wet, Marshy lands of Europe, Northern Asia, and even in parts of Scandinavia. It grows best in shady places, by waterways, marshes, or wet meadows. One variety is also native to North America. Traditionally, butterbur has been used to treat fever, wheezing and colds, as an antispasmodic to help ease menstrual cramping, as a heart stimulant and as a treatment for the plague. There is a history of its use to treat intestinal worms and kidney/urinary tract stones. Modern clinical trials in Germany indicate that an extract of butterbur may be an effective and well tolerated treatment of migraines in children and adolescents, as well as adults.

Constituents

Pyrrrolizidine type alkaloids, mainly senecionine and integerrimine; flavonoids, including quercetin, astragalin and isoquercitrin; petasin, neopetasin; tannins; mucilage; volatile oil; sesquiterpene

Parts Used

Root (rhizome)

Typical Preparations

Ethanollic (alcohol) or lipophilic (oil) extractions; Not recommended for use in teas or infusions.

Summary

While early studies on the use of butterbur for easing the symptoms of seasonal allergies show promising results, the research is not sufficient to draw a firm conclusion in its favor. There have been studies of the effectiveness of butterbur root extract on the symptoms of asthma, which are again, promising, but further study is necessary. In at least one study, people who reported a history of migraines had significantly fewer migraines than a control group given a placebo, and those migraines that they did get were shorter and less severe. In Germany, butterbur extract is approved for the treatment of spasmodic urinary pain, particularly when there are stones present. Overall, modern research seems to support the traditional uses of butterbur root extract, but further research, particularly large, randomized, double blind studies, are needed. . Besides its medicinal use, according to A Modern Herbal by Mrs.Grieve, butterbur has also been used in divination. An unmarried woman could see her future husband if she took the seeds and went to a "lonesome place". A half hour before sunrise on a Friday, she had to scatter the seeds while repeating, "I sow, I sow! Then, my own dear, come here, come here, and mow and mow!" If there was a husband in her future, she would see a vision of him with a scythe mowing grass.

Precautions

Butterbur contains Pyrrolizidine Alkaloids and its internal use is not recommended. There have been some reports of liver damage associated with the use of butterbur root extract. It should not be used by pregnant or nursing women. Not recommended for long term use.

Botanical: Petasites vulgaris (DESF.)

Family: N.O. Compositae

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---**Synonyms**---Langwort. Umbrella Plant. Bog Rhubarb. Flapperdock. Blatterdock. Capdockin. Bogshorns. Butter-Dock.

---**Part Used**---Root.

The Butterbur, a plant nearly allied to the Coltsfoot - being the *Tussilago petasites* of Linnaeus - is found in wet ground, lowlying, marshy meadows and by riversides, but is usually local.

---**Description**---It has a fleshy, stout root-stock, extensively creeping, which, like the Coltsfoot, sends up the flowers before the leaves appear. The flower-heads are, however, not produced singly, on separate stalks, but in crowned clusters in a dense spike, with many bracts interspersed, at the summit of a round, thick flower-stalk, 4 inches to a little over a foot in height, which first appears at the end of February or beginning of March, and is generally of a purplish hue.

There are two kinds of flowers - the male or stamen-bearing and the female or seedproducing - as a rule on different spikes, the female flowers being in denser, longer spikes than the male flowers, which are in shorter, loose clusters. Occasionally a few female flowers are found on the male spikes, and a few male flowers on the female spikes. The corollas are pale reddish purple or fleshcoloured, bell-shaped in the male flowers, and containing abundant nectar, but only threadlike in the female flowers, which contain no nectar, and are succeeded by the white feathery pappus, which crowns the seeds.

In April, as the flowers begin to decay, the leaves appear. They are on stout hollowed channelled foot-stalks, and when full grown very large - the largest leaves of any plant in Great Britain - the blade sometimes attaining 3 feet in diameter. It is roundish, heartshaped at the base, scalloped at the edges, with the portion between the projections finely toothed. The leaves are white and cobwebby with down both above and below when young, but when mature, most of the covering disappears from the upper surface though the leaves still remain grey and more or less downy beneath.

The name of the genus, *Petasites*, is derived from *petasos*, the Greek word for the felt hats worn by shepherds, and familiar to us in representations of Mercury, in reference to the large size of the leaves, which could be used as a head-covering. No other vegetation can live where these leaves grow, for they exclude light and air from all beneath, and where the plant abounds, it has been described as 'the most pernicious of all the weeds which this country produces.'

The name Butterbur is supposed to have been given it because formerly these large leaves were used to wrap butter in during hot weather. 'Lagwort' is an old name we sometimes find for it, in reference to the leaves delaying their appearance till after the flowers have faded, though once the leaf-shoots make a start, they grow with almost tropical luxuriance.

'The early flowering of this rank weed,' Hooker writes, 'induces the Swedish farmers to plant it near their beehives. Thus we see in our gardens the bees assembled on its affinities, *P. alba* and *P. fragrans*, at a season when scarcely any other flowers are expanded.'

In Germany an old name for the plant was *Pestilenzenwurt*, but one finds really very little either of evil or good assigned by the older writers to the Butterbur as compared with most other herbs. The old German name was given it, not as suggesting the plant was provocative of pestilence, but as an indication of its value as a remedy in time of such calamity (Henslow).

Anne Pratt says the former name of this plant was the 'plague-flower,' as it gained a successful reputation among the few remedies during the time of that malady. Lyte, in his *Herbal*, 1578, calls it 'a soveraigne medicine against the plague', and remarks of its leaves that 'one of them is large enough to cover a small table, as with a carpet,' and they are often 2 feet in width. Under its ample foliage, the poultry in farm meadows, shelter themselves from the rain, or find a cool retreat from the noonday sun. The Swedish farmers plant it in great quantities near their beehives, as bees are attracted by its flowers.

The seeds in some parts of the country have been used for love divination.

'The seeds of butterdock must be sowed by a young unmarried woman half an hour before sunrise on a Friday morning, in a lonesome place. She must strew the seeds gradually on the grass, saying these words:

I sow, I sow!
Then, my own dear,
Come here, come here,
And mow and mow!

The seed being scattered, she will see her future husband mowing with a scythe at a short distance from her. She must not be frightened, for if she says, "Have mercy on me," he will immediately vanish! This method is said to be infallible, but it is looked upon as a bold, desperate, and presumptuous undertaking!

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---**Part Used**---The rhizome, or root-stock which is blackish on the outside and whitish internally, and has a bitter and unpleasant taste, due to the resinous, bitter juice it contains.

---**Medicinal Action and Uses**---Butterbur root is medicinally employed as a heart stimulant, acting both as a cardiac tonic and also as a diuretic. It has been in use as a remedy in fevers, asthma, colds and urinary complaints, a decoction being taken warm in wineglassful doses, frequently repeated.

Both Butterbur and Coltsfoot are specific homoeopathic remedies for severe and obstinate neuralgia in the small of the back and the loins, a medicinal tincture being prepared in each case.

Gerard writes of the Butterbur:

'The roots dried and beaten to powder and drunke in wine is a soveraigne medicine against the plague and pestilent fevers, because it provoketh sweat and driveth from the heart all venim and evill heate; it killeth worms. The powder of the roots cureth all naughty filthy ulcers, if it be strewed therein.'

Culpepper says:

'It is a great strengthener of the heart and cheerer of the vital spirits: . . . if the powder thereof be taken in wine, it also resisteth the force of any other poison . . . the decoction of the root in wine is singularly good for those that wheeze much or are shortwinded.... The powder of the root taketh away all spots and blemishes of the skin.'

Another species known as the Winter Heliotrope, or Sweet-scented Coltsfoot (*P. fragrans*), flourishes in warm districts like South Devon, where it is abundant. It is even more spreading and luxuriant in growth than our native Coltsfoot, but as it flowers in the poorest soil and clothes waste land with its handsome foliage, it is certainly welcome *outside* the garden, and is even frequently planted in shrubberies. The fragrant flowers, which have the scent of vanilla and are like Butterbur in appearance, are freely borne in the depth of winter. The leaves appear in the spring and in favourable situations remain green till the young leaves appear in the succeeding season.