

Coltsfoot (*Tussilago farfara*)

Common Names: British tobacco, assfoot, tussilago and coughwort.

Location: This herb can be found in Europe and Asia.

Description: The flower buds of this herb are used medicinally.

Properties: This herb can be used to relieve congestion.

Uses: Coltsfoot can be used to treat bronchitis, laryngitis, and pneumonia.

Doses: You can find this herb in over the counter formulas and tea form.

Warnings: This herb can cause high blood pressure if too much is ingested

Also known as

Tussilago farfara, Horsehoof, Coughwort, Fieldhove, Bullsfoot, Cleats, Clayweed, Tusilago, and Ass's Foot.

Introduction

Coltsfoot grows wild over much of Europe, and has been used traditionally to treat chest ailments for hundreds of years. The name is derived from the horseshoe shaped leaves. It was so popular in Europe at one time that French pharmacists painted its flowers on their doorposts. It was brought to the American colonies from Europe. American colonists were known to wrap persons afflicted with whooping cough in blankets that had been soaked with a coltsfoot infusion. The fleshy leaves, stems and buds are also used in traditional Asian folk medicine to treat asthma, dry cough and bronchitis. Before the plant flowers, it resembles butterbur enough that old herbals caution against confusing the two. At one time, smoking dried coltsfoot leaves was a recommended treatment for coughs, bronchitis and emphysema symptoms. Nowadays, the recommended preparation is a tea. In fact, many herbal practitioners recommend preparing a thermos of coltsfoot tea before bed so that it is ready to be taken first thing in the morning when the coughs due to chronic lung problems are at their worst.

Constituents

mucilage, including numerous sugars; inulin; flavonoids, rutin, isoquercetin, tannin; pyrrolizidine alkaloids

Parts Used

Leaves, and sometimes the buds and flowers

Typical Preparations

Infusion, tea, syrup, capsules and extracts.

Summary

Coltsfoot is one of the most widely used herbs for the treatment of coughs and other lung complaints,

and is the basis for many of the herbal cough preparations sold in Europe. The chemical constituents have expectorant, anti-tussive, anti-spasmodic, demulcent, anti-catarrhal and diuretic properties, making coltsfoot extremely helpful in the case of racking coughs such as those that accompany chest colds, asthma and emphysema. However, the USDA classifies coltsfoot as an herb of "unknown safety", and the presence of minute amounts of pyrrolizidine alkaloids, which have been found to cause liver toxicity and cancer, has led to its banning in West Germany. The amount of these alkaloids is extremely small, though, and the beneficial effects are generally believed to outweigh the miniscule risk.

Precautions

Coltsfoot should not be used by pregnant women, as it may be an abortifacient, and the alkaloids seem to have a particularly harmful effect on the liver of the developing infant. Pyrrolizidine alkaloids present in the plant are potentially toxic in large doses, but have not proven toxic in the doses usually used to treat coughs. Still, it is recommended that coltsfoot tea or syrup not be used for more than 4-6 weeks at a time.

Botanical: Tussilago Farfara (LINN.)

Family: N.O. Compositae

- [Description](#)
- [Parts Used](#)
- [Constituents](#)
- [Medicinal Action and Uses](#)

---**Synonyms**---Coughwort. Hallfoot. Horsehoof. Ass's Foot. Foalswort. Fieldhove. Bullsfoot. Donnhove. (*French*) Pas d'âne

---**Parts Used**---Leaves, flowers, root.

---**Habitat**---Coltsfoot grows abundantly throughout England, especially along the sides of railway banks and in waste places, on poor stiff soils, growing as well in wet ground as in dry situations. It has long-stalked, hoof-shaped leaves, about 4 inches across, with angular teeth on the margins. Both surfaces are covered, when young, with loose, white, felted woolly hairs, but those on the upper surface fall off as the leaf expands. This felty covering easily rubs off and before the introduction of matches, wrapped in a rag dipped in a solution of saltpetre and dried in the sun, used to be considered an excellent tinder.

---**Description**---The specific name of the plant is derived from *Farfarus*, an ancient name of the White Poplar, the leaves of which present some resemblance in form and colour to those of this plant. There is a closer resemblance, however, to the leaves of the Butterbur, which must not be collected in error; they may be distinguished by their more rounded outline, larger size and less sinuate margin.

After the leaves have died down, the shoot rests and produces in the following February a flowering stem, consisting of a single peduncle with numerous reddish bracts and whitish hairs and a terminal, composite yellow flower, whilst other shoots develop leaves, which appear only much later, after the flower stems in their turn have died down. These two parts of the plant, both of which are used medicinally, are, therefore, collected separately and usually sold separately.

The root is spreading, small and white, and has also been used medicinally.

An old name for Coltsfoot was *Filius ante patrem* (the son before the father), because the star-like, golden flowers appear and wither before the broad, sea-green leaves are produced.

The seeds are crowned with a tuft of silky hairs, the *pappus*, which are often used by goldfinches to line their nests, and it has been stated were in former days frequently employed by the Highlanders for stuffing mattresses and pillows.

The underground stems preserve their vitality for a long period when buried deeply, so that in places where the plant has not been observed before, it will often spring up in profusion after the ground has been disturbed. In gardens and pastures it is a troublesome weed, very difficult to extirpate.

---Parts Used---The leaves, collected in June and early part of July, and, to a slighter extent, the flower-stalks collected in February.

---Constituents---All parts of the plant abound in mucilage, and contain a little tannin and a trace of a bitter amorphous glucoside. The flowers contain also a phytosterol and a dihydride alcohol, Faradial.

[\[Top\]](#)

---Medicinal Action and Uses---Demulcent, expectorant and tonic. One of the most popular of cough remedies. It is generally given together with other herbs possessing pectoral qualities, such as Horehound, Marshmallow, Ground Ivy, etc.

The botanical name, *Tussilago*, signifies 'cough dispeller,' and Coltsfoot has justly been termed 'nature's best herb for the lungs and her most eminent thoracic.' The smoking of the leaves for a cough has the recommendation of Dioscorides, Galen, Pliny, Boyle, and other great authorities, both ancient and modern, Linnaeus stating that the Swedes of his time smoked it for that purpose. Pliny recommended the use of both roots and leaves. The leaves are the basis of the British Herb Tobacco, in which Coltsfoot predominates, the other ingredients being Buckbean, Eyebright, Betony, Rosemary, Thyme, Lavender, and Chamomile flowers. This relieves asthma and also the difficult breathing of old bronchitis. Those suffering from asthma, catarrh and other lung troubles derive much benefit from smoking this Herbal Tobacco, the use of which does not entail any of the injurious effects of ordinary tobacco.

A decoction is made of 1 OZ. of leaves, in 1 quart of water boiled down to a pint, sweetened with honey or liquorice, and taken in teacupful doses frequently. This is good for both colds and asthma.

Coltsfoot tea is also made for the same purpose, and Coltsfoot Rock has long been a domestic remedy for coughs.

A decoction made so strong as to be sweet and glutinous has proved of great service in scrofulous cases, and, with Wormwood, has been found efficacious in calculus complaints.

The flower-stalks contain constituents similar to those of the leaves, and are directed by the British Pharmacopoeia to be employed in the preparation of Syrup of Coltsfoot, which is much recommended for use in chronic bronchitis.

In Paris, the Coltsfoot flowers used to be painted as a sign on the doorpost of an apothecarie's shop.

Culpepper says:

'The fresh leaves, or juice, or syrup thereof, is good for a bad dry cough, or wheezing and shortness of breath. The dry leaves are best for those who have their rheums and distillations upon their lungs causing a cough: for which also the dried leaves taken as tobacco, or the root is very

good. The distilled water hereof simply or with elder-flowers or nightshade is a singularly good remedy against all agues, to drink 2 OZ. at a time and apply cloths wet therein to the head and stomach, which also does much good being applied to any hot swellings or inflammations. It helpeth St. Anthony's fire (erysypelas) and burnings, and is singular good to take away wheals.'

One of the local names for Coltsfoot, viz. Donnhove, seems to have been derived from *Donn*, an old word for horse, hence *Donkey* (a little horse). Donnhove became corrupted to Tun-hoof as did Hay-hove (a name for Ground Ivy) to ale-hoof.

The plant is so dissimilar in appearance at different periods that both Gerard and Parkinson give two illustrations: one entitled 'Tussilago florens, Coltsfoot in floure,' and the other, 'Tussilaginous folia, the leaves of Coltsfoot,' or 'Tussilago herba sine flore.'

'Coltsfoot hath many white and long creeping roots, from which rise up naked stalke about a spanne long, bearing at the top yellow floures; when the stalke and seede is perished there appeare springing out of the earth many broad leaves, green above, and next the ground of a white, hoarie, or grayish colour. Seldom, or never, shall you find leaves and floures at once, but the floures are past before the leaves come out of the ground, as may appear by the first picture, which setteth forth the naked stalke and floures, and by the second, which porttraiteth the leaves only.'

Pliny and many of the older botanists thought that the Coltsfoot was without leaves, an error that is scarcely excusable, for, notwithstanding the fact that the flowers appear in a general way before the leaves, small leaves often begin to make their appearance before the flowering season is over.

Pliny recommends the dried leaves and roots of Coltsfoot to be burnt, and the smoke drawn into the mouth through a reed and swallowed, as a remedy for an obstinate cough, the patient sipping a little wine between each inhalation. To derive the full benefit from it, it had to be burnt on cypress charcoal.