

Fumitory Profile

Also known as

Fumaria officinalis, Earthsmoke, and Fumaria.

Introduction

Fumitory is a small climbing herb with weak stems, deeply indented leaves, and spikes of small flowers of a pinkish hue, topped with purple or, white. It is native to Europe and North Africa, but grows quite well all over the planet. The ancient Romans, according to the historian Pliny, named this useful plant *Kapnos*, which means smoke, because the juice of the plant brings on such a flow of tears that the sight becomes dim as with smoke. It was also said that the plant did not grow from a seed, but from the fumes rising up from the underground. Fumitory was used in Roman medicine to treat problems of the eyes, and also a smoke for expelling evil spirits. Nicholas Culpepper, in his work *The Complete Herbal* (1652) wrote that it was good for all types of afflictions of the skin, and suggested using the whole plant, although modern thought is that only the leaves may be necessary. As late as the early twentieth century, fumitory was a primary herb for treating the "leprous afflictions" described the great herbalist M. Grieve and also for liver disease. The modern uses of fumitory in herbal medicine are less dramatic. Fumitory is taken internally to treat acne, eczema, and indigestion, and used in eyewashes to treat conjunctivitis.

Constituents

Flavonoid glycosides, isoquinolones.

Parts Used

The above-ground parts of the herb, dried and cut.

Typical Preparations

Infusions and teas, and can be used in capsule or extract form. A water infusion of this herb is used as a pack or compress for skin problems.

Summary

Fumitory was once used as the "hiccup" herb. It has a gentle, anti-spasmodic effect on the upper digestive tract that relieves hiccups, belches, and burps. It is especially useful for relieving minor pain caused by gallstones. For maximum effect, use with celandine and peppermint for gallbladder spasms or with angelica, boldo, chamomile, cinnamon, or licorice for indigestion. There is a German E commission monograph for fumitory that lists its uses for spastic discomfort of the gallstones, the bile ducts, and the gastrointestinal tracts.

Precautions

Like many other herbs, a little fumitory is a stimulant and a lot of fumitory is sedative so avoid excessive use.

Botanical: *Fumaria officinalis* (LINN.)

Family: N.O. Fumariaceae

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---**Synonyms**---Earth Smoke. Beggary. Fumus. Vapor. Nidor. Fumus Terrae. Fumiterry, Scheiteregi. Taubenkropp. Kaphnos. Wax Dolls.

---**Part Used**---Herb.

---**Habitat**---Europe and America. Parts of Asia, Australia and South Africa.

---**Description**---A small annual plant, a common weed in many parts of Europe, including Britain, and naturalized in the United States.

The Fumitories, of which *Corydalis* and *Fumaria* are the only two fully British genera, are distinguished in the Order of Fumariaceae by having one of the petals swollen or spurred at the base, and a oneseeded capsule which does not open. The name is said to be derived either from the fact that its whitish, blue-green colour gives it the appearance of smoke rising from the ground, or, according to Pliny, because the juice of the plant brings on such a flow of tears that the sight becomes dim as with smoke, and hence its reputed use in affections of the eye. According to the ancient exorcists, when the plant is burned, its smoke has the power of expelling evil spirits, it having been used for this purpose in the famous geometrical gardens of St. Gall. There is a legend that the plant was produced, not from seed, but from vapours arising out of the earth.

The herb is small and slender, with weak, straggling, or climbing stems, decomposed leaves, and clusters or spikes of small flowers of a pinkish hue, topped with purple, or more rarely, white. The leaves have no odour, but taste bitter and saline. The plant flowers almost throughout the summer in fields, gardens, and on banks, and in ditches, spreading with great rapidity. At Mudgee, in New South Wales, it was reported to have smothered a wheat crop. Shakespeare makes several references to the herb. An interesting peculiarity is that it is very seldom visited by insects. It is self-fertile, and sets every seed.

The flowers are used to make a yellow dye for wool.

---**Constituents**---The leaves yield by expression a juice which has medicinal properties. An extract, prepared by evaporating the expressed juice, or a decoction of the leaves, throws out upon its surface a

copious saline efflorescence. Fumaric acid was early identified as present, and its isomerism with maleic acid was established later. The alkaloid Fumarine has been believed to be identical with corydaline, but it differs both in formula and in its reaction to sulphuric and nitric acids. It occurs in colourless, tasteless crystals, freely soluble in chloroform, less so in benzine, still less so in alcohol and ether, sparingly soluble in water.

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---Medicinal Action and Uses---A weak tonic, slightly diaphoretic, diuretic, and aperient; valuable in all visceral obstructions, particularly those of the liver, in scorbutic affections, and in troublesome eruptive diseases, even those of the leprous order. A decoction makes a curative lotion for milk-crust on the scalp of an infant. Physicians and writers from Dioscorides to Chaucer, and from the fourteenth century to Cullen and to modern times value its purifying power. The Japanese make a tonic from it. Cows and sheep eat it, and the latter are said to derive great benefit from it. The leaves, in decoction or extract, may be used in almost any doses. The inspissated juice has also been employed, also a syrup, powder, cataplasm, distilled water, and several tinctures.

French and German physicians still prefer it to most other medicines as a purifier of the blood; while sometimes the dried leaves are smoked in the manner of tobacco, for disorders of the head. Dr. Cullen, among its good effects in cutaneous disorders, mentions the following:

'There is a disorder of the skin, which, though not attended with any alarming symptoms of danger to the life of the patient, is thought to place the empire of beauty in great jeopardy; the complaint is frequently brought on by neglecting to use a parasol, and may be known by sandy spots, vulgarly known as freckles, scattered over the face. Now, be it known to all whom it may concern, that the infusion of the leaves of the abovedescribed plant is said to be an excellent specific for removing these freckles and clearing the skin; and ought, we think, to be chiefly employed by those who have previously removed those moral blemishes which deform the mind, or degrade the dignity of a reasonable and an immortal being.'

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---Dosage---Of Fumarine, 1/3 or 1/4 of a grain is moderately excitant; 3 grains are first irritant, then sedative. Of the expressed juice, 2 fluid ounces or more, twice a day. Of fluid extract, 1/2 to 1 drachm.

For dyspepsia, 2 oz. of the flowers and tops may be macerated in 3 pints of Madeira wine, and taken twice a day in doses of 2 to 4 fluid ounces.

Fluid extract 1/2 to 1 drachm.

---Old Recipes and Prescriptions---

The Liquid Juice four or five spoonfuls in the morning, fasting, with a glass of white Port wine. It purges a little downwards, but more especially if mixed with an infusion of Senna in wine. It purifies the blood from salt, choleric, or viscous humours, and strengthens all the Viscera, not leaving any evil quality behind it.

The Essence has all the virtues of the former, but is more efficacious. A safe remedy also against adult cholera and melancholy or obstructions which are the cause of choleric and putrid fevers, jaundice, Strangury of Urine through Gravel, Sand, or Viscous Matter, all of which it expels in abundance.

Dose 5 or 6 spoonfuls in white wine or clarified whey.

The Syrup Whether made of the juice or greenherb, has all the virtue, but is weaker in operation, and

therefore ought to be given mixed with the Syrup of Damask Roses or Peach Blossoms, or Tincture of Senna. Very effectual against Jaundice, Dropsy, and Gout, and is a most singular thing against hypochondriack melancholy in any person whatsoever.

The Decoction in Water or Wine Weaker than the above, and 6 to 8 oz. may be given in the morning, fasting.

The Power of the Dried Herb. A drachm, with half a drachm of Powder of Esula Root, and given in 5 or 6 spoonful of the essence of juice, causes vomiting and cleanses the stomach and bowels, effectual against Dropsy, Scurvy, Jaundice, Gout and Rheumatism, but because it stirs up much wind, should be corrected with a few drops of oil of Anise or Fennel Seed, or with the Powder of the same.

The Collurium. 3 ounces of Juice or Essence of Fumitory, mixed with one ounce each of distilled Water of Fumitory, and honey. An excellent thing against sores, inflamed, running and watery Eyes. Also a healing Gargle. Drops in the Eyes clear the sight and take away redness. If the Juice be mixed with equal parts of Juice of Sharp-pointed Docks and Wine Vinegar, and a contaminated Skin be washed therewith, it cures it of Scabs, Itch, Wheals, Pimples, Scurf, etc.

The Distilled Water has the virtues of the Juice, but is much weaker, and may be used as a Vehicle for any of the other Preparations. Taken with good Venice Treacle, it is good against Plague, driving forth the Malignity by sweat.

The Spirituous Tincture is good against Plague, Fevers, Colic, and Gripping of the Guts, whether in Young or Old.

Dose, 2 to 3 drachms in Canary or other fit vehicle.

The Acid Tincture is an excellent Antiscorbutick, good against Vapors and Tumors which cause fiery Eruptions. Causes a good Appetite and a strong Digestion. To be given in all the patient drinks, so many drops as may give the Liquor a grateful or pleasant acidity, and to be continued for some time.

The Saline Tincture cures Scabs, Pimples, Leprosy, etc., by bathing or well washing the parts affected therewith, as hot as can be endured, and continuing for some considerable time.

The Powder of the Seed. Stronger than the Powder of the Herb, prevalent against the Dropsy, being given daily with 10 to 12 grains of Scammony. A drachm of the simple powder, morning and night, especially in an infusion of Senna, may do wonders in Melancholy.

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---Other Fumitories---

American Fumitory (*Fumaria Indica*, or *Codder Indian*) of Virginia and Canada has the virtues of Common Fumitory, but is more bitter and more powerful. The tuberous American or Indian Fumitory is much weaker.

Bulbous Fumitory, so-called, is *Adoxa Meschatellina*, and belongs to the *Octandria class*.

The Lyre Flower of Japan and Siberia (*Dicentra* or *F. spectabilis*) belongs to the Fumitory Order.

F. cucullaria (Naked- talked Fumitory) is a native of Canada.

F. fungosa (Spongy-flowered Fumitory) is a native of North America.

F. mobilis (Great-flowered Fumitory) is a native of Siberia.

F. sempervirens (Glaucous Fumitory) is a native of North America.

F. lutea (Yellow Fumitory) is a native of Barbary.

F. Sibirica (Siberian Fumitory) is a native of Siberia.

F. capnoides (White-flowered Fumitory) is a native of South Europe.

F. enneaphylla (White-flowered Fumitory) is a native of Spain and Italy.

F. capreolata (Ramping Fumitory) is a native of Provence, Silesia and Britain.

F. spicula (Narrow-leaved Fumitory) is a native of Spain, Portugal, Italy, and France.

F. claviculata (Climbing Fumitory) is a native of Southern Europe and Britain.

F. vesicaria (Bladdered Fumitory) is a native of the Cape of Good Hope.

F. parviflora (Small-flowered Fumitory) is a native of hot countries. Rare in Britain.

F. densiflora is a native of Southern Europe and Britain.

Some of these differences may merely be clue to situation.

In ancient history they are all included among medicinal species.