

Plantain Leaf and Powder Profile

Also known as

Plantago major (and minor), Broadleaf Plantain, White Man's Footprint, Common Plantain, Patrick's Dock, Ripple Grass, Snakeweed, Waybread, Englishman's Foot.

Introduction

The common plantain grows throughout the US, but is of Eurasian descent, and is now naturalized throughout the world. Legend has it that Alexander the Great discovered it and brought it with him back to Europe in 327 BCE. It has been referred to as the Whiteman's Foot by Native Americans, as wherever they went, it seemed to spring up. and in some places, it is seen as a noxious, invasive weed. It is, however, a useful little plant. It has been used by many cultures the world over, and the Saxons considered it one of their nine sacred herbs. It was considered an early Christian symbol of the path followed by the devout and many cultures today refer to it as an aphrodisiac. The leaves are quite edible, and often used raw in salads and cooked as greens. Older leaves have a stronger, sometimes objectionable flavor, and can be tough and stringy, but can be used to make tea. Plantain is very high in vitamins A and C and in calcium. Medicinally, Native Americans used plantain leaves to relieve the pain of bee stings and insect bites, stop the itching of poison ivy and other allergic rashes, and promote healing in sores and bruises. Plantain tea can be used as a mouthwash to help heal and prevent sores in the mouth, and as an expectorant. Most recently, plantain is being marketed as a stop smoking aid, adding one more use to the list of ways that this versatile herb is useful.

Constituents

allantion, apigenin, aucubin, baicalein, linoleic acid, oleanolic acid, sorbitol, and tannin, beta carotene, vitamin C, calcium

Parts Used

The whole leaf and some stem is acceptable.

Typical Preparations

Eaten raw and fresh in salads, as a tea, in tincture form and as an external compress.

Summary

Plantain has been used as a panacea in some Native American cultures and with some very good reasons. Many of its active constituents show antibacterial and antimicrobial properties, as well as being anti-inflammatory and antitoxic. The leaves, shredded or chewed, are a traditional treatment for insect and animal bites and the antibacterial action helps prevent infection and the anti-inflammatory helps to relieve pain, burning, and itching. There is some investigation ongoing to study its affects on lowering

blood sugar.

Precautions

None known

Botanical: *Plantago major* (LINN.)

Family: N.O. Plantaginaceae

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---**Synonyms**---Broad-leaved Plantain. Ripple Grass. Waybread. Slan-lus. Waybread. Snakeweed. Cuckoo's Bread. Englishman's Foot. White Man's Foot. (*Anglo-Saxon*) Weybroed.

---**Parts Used**---Root, leaves, flower-spikes.

The Common Broad-leaved Plantain is a very familiar perennial 'weed,' and may be found anywhere by roadsides and in meadow-land.

---**Description**---It grows from a very short rhizome, which bears below a great number of long, straight, yellowish roots, and above, a large, radial rosette of leaves and a few long, slender, densely-flowered spikes. The leaves are ovate, blunt, abruptly contracted at the base into a long, broad, channelled footstalk (petiole). The blade is 4 to 10 inches long and about two-thirds as broad, usually smooth, thickish, five to eleven ribbed, the ribs having a strongly fibrous structure, the margin entire, or coarsely and unevenly toothed. The flower-spikes, erect, on long stalks, are as long as the leaves, 1/4 to 1/3 inch thick and usually blunt. The flowers are somewhat purplish-green, the calyx fourparted, the small corolla bell-shaped and four-lobed, the stamens four, with purple anthers. The fruit is a two-celled capsule, not enclosed in the perianth, and containing four to sixteen seeds.

The Plantain belongs to the natural order Plantaginaceae, which contains more than 200 species, twenty-five or thirty of which have been reported as in domestic use.

The drug is without odour: the leaves are saline, bitterish and acrid to the taste; the root is saline and sweetish.

The glucoside Aucubin, first isolated in *Aucuba japonica*, has been reported as occurring in many species.

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---**Medicinal Action and Properties**---Refrigerant, diuretic, deobstruent and somewhat astringent. Has been used in inflammation of the skin, malignant ulcers, intermittent fever, etc., and as a vulnerary, and externally as a stimulant application to sores. Applied to a bleeding surface, the leaves are of some value in arresting haemorrhage, but they are useless in internal haemorrhage, although they were formerly used for bleeding of the lungs and stomach, consumption and dysentery. The fresh leaves are

applied whole or bruised in the form of a poultice. Rubbed on parts of the body stung by insects, nettles, etc., or as an application to burns and scalds, the leaves will afford relief and will stay the bleeding of minor wounds.

Fluid extract: dose, 1/2 to 1 drachm.

In the Highlands the Plantain is still called 'Slan-lus,' or plant of healing, from a firm belief in its healing virtues. Pliny goes so far as to state, 'on high authority,' that if 'it be put into a pot where many pieces of flesh are boiling, it will sodden them together.' He also says that it will cure the madness of dogs.

Erasmus, in his *Colloquia*, tells a story of a toad, who, being bitten by a spider, was straightway freed from any poisonous effects he may have dreaded by the prompt eating of a Plantain leaf.

Another old Herbal says: 'If a woodhound (mad dog) rend a man, take this wort, rub it fine and lay it on; then will the spot soon be whole.' And in the United States the plant is called 'Snake Weed,' from a belief in its efficacy in cases of bites from venomous creatures; it is related that a dog was one day stung by a rattlesnake and a preparation of the juice of the Plantain and salt was applied as promptly as possible to the wound. The animal was in great agony, but quickly recovered and shook off all trace of its misadventure. Dr. Robinson (*New Family Herbal*) tells us that an Indian received a great reward from the Assembly of South Carolina for his discovery that the Plantain was 'the chief remedy for the cure of the rattlesnake.'

The Broad-leaved Plantain seems to have followed the migrations of our colonists to every part of the world, and in both America and New Zealand it has been called by the aborigines the 'Englishman's Foot' (or the White Man's Foot), for wherever the English have taken possession of the soil the Plantain springs up. Longfellow refers to this in 'Hiawatha.'

Our Saxon ancestors esteemed it highly and in the old *Lacnunga* the Weybroed is mentioned as one of nine sacred herbs. In this most ancient source of Anglo-Saxon medicine, we find this 'salve for flying venom':

'Take a handful of hammer wort and a handful of maythe (chamomile) and a handful of *waybroad* and roots of water dock, seek those which will float, and one eggshell full of clean honey, then take clean butter, let him who will help to work up the salve, melt it thrice: let one sing a mass over the worts, before they are put together and the salve is wrought up.

Some of the recipes for ointments in which Plantain is an ingredient have lingered to the present day. Lady Northcote, in *The Book of Herbs* (1903), mentions an ointment made by an old woman in Exeter that up to her death about twenty years ago was in much request. It was made from Southernwood, Plantain leaves, Black Currant leaves, Elder buds, Angelica and Parsley, chopped, pounded and simmered with clarified butter and was considered most useful for burns or raw surfaces. A most excellent ointment can also be made from Pilewort (Celandine), Elder buds, Houseleek and the Broad Plantain leaf.

Decoctions of Plantain entered into almost every old remedy, and it was boiled with Docks, Comfrey and a variety of flowers.

A decoction of Plantain was considered good in disorders of the kidneys, and the root, powdered, in complaints of the bowels. The expressed juice was recommended for spitting of blood and piles. Boyle recommends an electuary made of fresh Comfrey roots, juice of Plantain and sugar as very efficacious in spitting of blood. Plantain juice mixed with lemon juice was judged an excellent diuretic. The powdered dried leaves, taken in drink, were thought to destroy worms.

To prepare a plain infusion, still recommended in herbal medicine for diarrhoea and piles, pour 1 pint of boiling water on 1 OZ. of the herb, stand in a warm place for 20 minutes, afterwards strain and let cool. Take a wineglassful to half a teacupful three or four times a day.

The small mucilaginous seeds have been employed as a substitute for linseed. For 'thrush' they are recommended as most useful, 1 OZ. of seeds to be boiled in 1 1/2 pint of water down to a pint, the liquid then made into a syrup with sugar and honey and given to the child in tablespoonful doses, three or four times daily.

The seeds are relished by most small birds and quantities of the ripe spikes are gathered near London for the supply of cage birds.

Abercrombie, writing in 1822 (*Every Man his own Gardener*), giving a list of forty-four Salad herbs, includes Plantain.

Dr. Withering (*Arrangement of Plants*) states that sheep, goats and swine eat it, but that cows and horses refuse it.

It is a great disfigurement to lawns, rapidly multiplying if allowed to spread, each plant quite destroying the grass that originally occupied the spot usurped by its dense rosette of leaves.

Salmon's *Herbal* (1710) gives the following manifold uses for *Plantage major*:

'The liquid juice clarified and drunk for several days helps distillation of rheum upon the throat, glands, lungs, etc. Doses, 3 to 8 spoonful. An especial remedy against ulceration of the lungs and a vehement cough arising from same. It is said to be good against epilepsy, dropsy, jaundice and opens obstructions of the liver, spleen and reins. It cools inflammations of the eyes and takes away the pin and web (so called) in them. Dropt into the ears, it eases their pains and restores hearing much decayed. Doses, 3 to 6 spoonful more or less, either alone or with some fit vehicle morning and night. The powdered root mixed with equal parts of powder of Pellitory of Spain and put into a hollow tooth is said to ease the pain thereof. Powdered seeds stop vomiting, epilepsy, lethargy, convulsions, dropsy, jaundice, strangury, obstruction of the liver, etc. The liniment made with the juice and oil of Roses eases headache caused by heat, and is good for lunatics. It gives great ease (being applyed) in all hot gouts, whether in hands or feet, especially in the beginning, to cool the heat and repress the humors. The distilled water with a little alum and honey dissolved in it is of good use for washing, cleansing and healing a sore ulcerated mouth or throat.'

'Salmon also tells us that a good cosmetic is made with essence of Plantain, houseleeks and lemon juice.

Culpepper tells us that the Plantain is 'in the command of Venus and cures the head by antipathy to Mars, neither is there hardly a martial disease but it cures.' He also states that 'the water is used for all manner of spreading scabs, tetter, ringworm, shingles, etc.'

From the days of Chaucer onwards we find reference in literature to the healing powers of Plantain.

Gower (1390) says: 'And of Plantaine he hath his herb sovereigne,' and Chaucer mentions it in the *Prologue of the Chanounes Yeman*. Shakespeare, both in *Love's Labour's Lost*, iii, i, and in *Romeo and Juliet*, I, ii, speaks of the 'plain Plantain' and 'Plantain leaf' as excellent for a broken shin, and again in *Two Noble Kinsmen*, I, ii: 'These poore slight sores neede not a Plantin.' His reference to it in *Troilus and Cressida*, III. ii: 'As true as steel, as Plantage to the moon,' is an allusion that is now no longer clear to us. Again, Shenstone in the *Schoolmistress*: 'And plantain rubb'd that heals the reaper's wound.'