

# Pleurisy Root and Powder Profile

## Also known as

Asclepius tuberosa, Canada-root, Chiggerflower, Indian Posy, Orange-root, Orange Swallowwort, Tuberroot, Whiteroot, Windroot, and Yellow or Orange milkweed.

## Introduction

Pleurisy weed is better known in parts of the country as butterfly weed. The plant is a variety of milkweed native to eastern North America. It's a popular plant in country gardens, and is known to attract butterflies, particularly monarchs. It has been used medicinally by a number of Native American tribes for centuries. Much of the plant is edible, including the young shoots, flower buds and stems. The milkweed fibers can be used to make fabric or rope. Various parts of the butterfly weed have been used to treat sore throat and cough, pleurisy and other bronchial and pulmonary problems, to treat diarrhea and to help encourage milk production in mothers. It has been used as an emetic, an antitoxin and a contraceptive. At least one tribe of Native Americans considered it their most important medicine. Pleurisy weed does have a darker side, however. The alkaloids it contains include some that can be toxic in the mature plant. It is considered toxic to livestock, and not recommended for use by pregnant or breastfeeding women, or for children.

## Constituents

Resinoids, glycosides, and a small amount of alkaloids

## Parts Used

Root and sometimes the leaves and plant

## Typical Preparations

In tea infusions, as an extract and very seldom in capsules.

## Summary

Chemicals that occur naturally in pleurisy root can reduce the thickness of mucus in the lungs and encourage coughing, which can relieve the pain and congestion associated with pleurisy and other lung problems. In addition, other constituents mimic the action of estrogen in the body, which has made concoctions of pleurisy weed useful in treating menstrual problems, specifically in bringing on delayed menstruation, or for use as an abortifacient.

## Precautions

Pleurisy weed products should not be used by pregnant women because of the danger of miscarriage. In

addition, pleurisy weed has a similar effect on the heart to digoxin, and should be avoided by those with heart problems, or those who are taking any heart stimulant medications. Pleurisy root may interact with a number of other drugs and herbs, so it's important to consult your health practitioner if you intend to use pleurisy for medicinal purposes. Its use is not recommended by those with pre-existing liver conditions. May cause gastro-intestinal upset.

**Botanical: *Asclepias tuberosa* (LINN.)**

**Family: N.O. Asclepiadaceae**

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**---Synonyms---**Butterfly-weed. Swallow-wort. Tuber Root. Wind Root. Colic Root. Orange Milkweed.

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

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The genus *Asclepias* contains about eighty species, mostly natives of North America, a few being indigenous to South America and Africa.

*Asclepias tuberosa*, common from Canada southwards, growing from Ontario to Minnesota, most abundantly southward and southwestward, is known popularly as Pleurisy Root, from its medicinal use. Its stem forms an exception to *Asclepias* in general, by being almost or entirely devoid of the acrid milky juice containing caoutchouc, that distinguishes the rest of the genus and has gained them the name of Milkweeds.

**---Description---**It is a handsome, fleshy rooted, perennial plant, growing 1 to 1 1/2 foot high and bearing corymbs of deep yellow and orange flowers in September. When cultivated, it does not like being disturbed, and prefers good peat soil.

The rootstock, the part used medicinally, is spindle-shaped and has a knotty crown, slightly but distinctly annulate, the remainder longitudinally wrinkled.

The dried root as found in commerce is usually in cut or broken pieces of variable size, 1 to 6 inches long and about 3/4 inch in thickness, externally pale orange-brown, becoming greyish-brown when kept long, internally whitish. It is tough and has an uneven fracture; the broken surface is granular; that of the bark is short and brittle. The wood is yellowish, with large white medullary rays. The drug is almost inodorous, but has a bitterish and disagreeable, somewhat acrid taste.

The powdered drug is yellowish brown and when examined under the microscope shows numerous simple or 2 to 4 compound starch grains, also calcium oxalate crystals.

The Western Indians boil the tubers for food, prepare a crude sugar from the flowers and eat the young seed-pods, after boiling them, with buffalo meat. Some of the Canadian tribes use the young shoots as a potherb, after the manner of asparagus.

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**---Constituents---**The root contains a glucosidal principle, Asclepiadin, which occurs as an amorphous body, is soluble in ether, alcohol and hot water. It also contains several resins, and odorous fatty matter,

and a trace of volatile oil. It yields not more than 9 per cent of ash.

**---Medicinal Action and Uses---**Antispasmodic, diaphoretic, expectorant, tonic, carminative and mildly cathartic.

From early days this *Asclepias* has been regarded as a valuable medicinal plant. It is one of the most important of the indigenous American remedies, and until lately was official in the United States Pharmacopoeia.

It possesses a specific action on the lungs, assisting expectoration, subduing inflammation and exerting a general mild tonic effect on the system, making it valuable in all chest complaints. It is of great use in pleurisy, mitigating the pain and relieving the difficulty of breathing, and is also recommended in pulmonary catarrh. It is extensively used in the Southern States in these cases, also in consumption, in doses of from 20 grains to a drachm in a powder, or in the form of a decoction.

It has also been used with great advantage in diarrhea, dysentery and acute and chronic rheumatism, in low typhoid states and in eczema. It is claimed that the drug may be employed with benefit in flatulent colic and indigestion, but in these conditions it is rarely used.

In large doses it acts as an emetic and purgative.

A teacupful of the warm infusion (1 in 30) taken every hour will powerfully promote free perspiration and suppressed expectoration. The infusion may be prepared by taking 1 teaspoonful of the powder in a cupful of boiling water.

The decoction is taken in doses of 2 to 3 fluid ounces.

The dose of the fluid extract is 1/2 to 1 drachm; of *Asclepin*, 1 to 4 grains.

A much-recommended herbal recipe is: Essence of composition powder, 1 OZ.; fluid extract of Pleurisy Root, 1 OZ. Mix and take a teaspoonful three or four times daily in warm sweetened water.

It is often combined with *Angelica* and *Sassafras* for producing perspiration in fever and pleurisy and for equalizing the circulation of the blood.

More than a dozen other species have similar properties.