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Comfrey – The Compost Plant

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Tucked away next to the compost pile in many older gardens is the comfrey plant (*Symphytum officinale*). Right about now the plant is in full bloom with hundreds of small, tubular blue blossoms that are buzzing all day long with bees. There are white and pinkish cultivars of comfrey as well. Unless staked, the 3 to 5 foot stems of comfrey have a tendency to sprawl. This showy member of the borage family has leaves that are large, hairy and taper to a point.

Comfrey is an Old World herb. It is native to Europe and Asia but has naturalized throughout the world. In its natural habitat, comfrey would be growing in moist sites near waterways and also in wet meadows. It is a vigorous but not aggressive plant. Mine has stayed in the same spot for decades getting a bit larger and taller each year. Being a perennial, the plant dies down to the ground each winter. The roots go down deep so select a spot for comfrey where it can live happily for decades without being transplanted.

Comfrey has had a reputation as a healing herb since 400 BCE. Its Latin name, *Symphytum*, comes from the Greek and means ‘coming together’. It was used by Discorides, a Greek physician of the first century to mend broken bones and heal wounds. In older herbals, comfrey was recommended as a cure-all for just about every condition imaginable including arthritis, heartburn, dysentery, ulcers, pleurisy, tuberculosis and many more.

The leaves were used in salads and tossed into stews and soups. Comfrey leaves also served as animal fodder.

Now internal consumption by humans or animals is strongly discouraged as a study in the late 70s showed that rats that ate comfrey developed liver tumors. It may also cause lung damage and other health problems due to a toxic component in the plant know as pyrrolizidine alkaloids.

Because comfrey does also contain substances that helps new skin cells grow, it is still used in some ointments and creams. Allantoin, rosmarinic acid and tannins are healing compounds contained in comfrey. There is evidence that in some cases they do reduce inflammation and help with various skin problems.

The University of Maryland Medical Center has issued some cautions when using skin products containing comfrey. They suggest just using products made from the leaves and not the roots, only purchasing products that contain no more than 5 to 20 percent comfrey, not using comfrey products on open wounds, limiting the amount of time that these products are used on the skin and administering them under a doctor's supervision.

Comfrey creams and ointments should not be applied on the skin of children, pregnant or breast-feeding women or the elderly. That is because the harmful substances in comfrey can be absorbed through the skin.

So while the use of comfrey for medicinal purposes is limited, it is still a useful plant to have in the garden or by the compost heap. Insect pollinators and hummingbirds will seek out its flowers. The floppy leaves provide shade and shelter for small animals, toads and insects. Sometimes slugs feed on the bottom foliage but I suspect that the frogs and toads attracted to this dark, moist environment keep them under control as feeding damage on my plant is fairly minor.

The roots of comfrey reach deep into the soil mining for nutrients and minerals as they grow. Leaves contain considerable amounts of nitrogen and potassium. Plants can be cut back a couple of times each year and the leaves added to the compost pile as a source of readily available nutrients to help stimulate the decomposition process. In the fall when the plant is killed by the frost, cut it to within a couple of inches to the ground and add the stems and leaves to the compost pile as well.

Comfrey is a rough and tumble ornamental attractive to wildlife and useful to add to the compost pile. If you know someone who has a plant, ask for a division. Plant it next to the compost bin or as a back of the border plant in the herb garden and enjoy the lovely blue flowers and the pollinators they bring.

If you have questions about growing comfrey or other horticultural topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.