Plantain – Pesky Weed or Marvelous Medicine?
By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

According to ancient Anglo-Saxon tradition, the god Wodin sent nine healing herbs into the world. They were to be used by all peoples regardless of economic or social status. They included plantain, a present day scourge of many home lawn enthusiasts, along with nettle, crabapple, chervil, betony, fennel, watercress, chamomile and wormwood.

Just about anyone with a backyard, garden or lawn is familiar with plantain although they might not know it by name. Broadleaf plantain (*Plantago major*) is a perennial plant with a cluster of 3 to 6 inch long, oval-shaped leaves that have 5 to 9 conspicuous ribs that parallel the leaf margins. The leaves form a rosette and the plant has an extensive fibrous root system.

About now, mature plants will start to send up stalks of flowers. The tiny flowers, greenish brown in color, are held on long, narrow spikes above the rosette of leaves but are not much to behold. Their rather innocuous looking flowers, however, give way to an abundance of seeds – as many as 20,000 per plant! Seeds do not germinate all at once but continue to do so throughout the growing season. Soil temperatures of 77°F are ideal for germination but they will start sprouting once the temperatures reach at least 50°F. A second species of plantain, buckhorn plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*) is not as common in lawns as it is along roadsides and in meadows and pastures. The leaves are long and narrow and the flowers are shorter but borne on taller stems. They appear to have a collar around them as the lower buds open first.

The early colonists introduced both of these plantain species when they came over from Europe. Native Americans called plantain ‘white man’s foot’ or ‘white man’s footprint’ because the plant followed the colonists wherever they went. Plantains thrive in disturbed, compacted soils and the Europeans damaged the native ecosystems with their settlements and agricultural systems. In addition, plantain seeds are very tiny and moved by foot traffic, livestock and today, probably vehicular traffic as well. Plantain seeds are known to be a
common contaminant of cereal grains so probably are now distributed throughout the world. As long as there are disturbed, unvegetated soils, plantain and other aggressive plants will move in.

For those not happy with plantains in their lawns and landscapes, what are some control measures? First, know the conditions under which plantains thrive, namely on sites of compacted soils where the grass is mowed very short, as well as in damper, more shaded situations. Compacted soils can be aerated and topdressed with compost. Mowing heights can be raised to 3 inches so newly germinated plantain seedlings will be shaded out. Keep off soils, if they are saturated, and reseed any bare spots with desired turfgrass species.

For small infestations, use a dandelion weeder or similar tool to loosen the roots and pull plantains, preferably, before they throw up flower stalks in the late spring. For heavy infestations in lawns, one might consider using a chemical broadleaf herbicide. Usually more than one application is necessary and be sure to check the label to see that plantain would be listed under what weeds are controlled. More earthy individuals might want to consider that plantain is, according to Wikipedia, “one of the most widely distributed and abundant medicinal crops in the world”. For thousands of years, poultices of leaves as well as root concoctions have been used to treat wounds, sores, respiratory infections, stings and fever.

Leaves of plantain are high in calcium, and vitamins A, C and K. Young tender leaves can be eaten raw in salads or added to stir-fries. Older leaves offer nutrition but are pretty tough to chew and best used in stews or soups. Also, older leaves are stringy and survivalists might note that the tough fibers could be used for fishing line, small cords or sutures.

Scientists have found that plantain does have medicinal properties including as an astringent, anti-inflammatory, analgesic, weak antibiotic, antioxidant, as a wound-healing agent and more. Perhaps a cup of plantain tea made from 2 or 3 washed tea leaves steeped for 10 minutes may help you with your ailments. Leaves can be dried or frozen for later use.

Always check with your doctor before using herbal remedies. Personally, I use plantain for insect bites. It works better for mosquitoes than for those tiny black flies. When bitten, I break off a leaf or two, crush or chew it depending on its moisture content and apply it to the bite. Usually this reduces the itching by a lot although only temporarily. My sister made plantain into tinctures, which also reduce the itch but just for short periods of time.

It is up to you to decide. Plantain – beneficial plant or weed? If you need more information on this plant or on other garden related queries, call the UConn Home & Garden Education Center (toll-free) at (877) 486-6271, visit www.ladybug.uconn.edu or get in touch with your local Cooperative Extension Center.