Many readers know burdock as the prickly thistle that grows wild on roadsides and in ditches. You probably remember its tenacious flower heads that stick to your clothes (and your pets) whenever you brush past. But burdock is much more than a bothersome plant. It is one of the ultimate detoxifying herbs found worldwide.

Burdock (Arctium lappa) is native to temperate regions of world, including Scandinavia, the Mediterranean, the British Isles, and most of Europe, as well as the Middle East, India, and much of Asia. Naturalized in North America, burdock can grow up to 5 feet (1.5 m) tall, with hefty, wide stems.
and elongated, heart-shaped leaves. It prefers fresh, well-drained, humus-rich soil with plenty of shaded sunlight.

**As delicious as asparagus**

Burdock was eaten as a vegetable during the Middle Ages. Today, the root is eaten in Japan as *gobo* and in Portugal and Italy as *bardana*. The plant’s long taproot is similar to the vegetable parsnip and is served boiled in soups and stews. Spring shoots are also eaten, in the same way that we eat asparagus. The seeds can be sprouted and used in salads and sandwiches.

Outside the kitchen, the dried root of a one-year-old plant is used in Western and traditional Chinese medicine. The root contains about 2.5 percent protein and 45 percent inulin, a complex sugar. Inulin has a demulcent effect on skin and mucous membranes in the body, helping form a protective film that soothes irritation or inflammation. Inulin also serves as a prebiotic, which means that it serves as food to probiotics, the healthy bacteria present in the digestive tract.

**As diverse as nature**

Various parts of the plant—root, seeds, and leaves—are used medically in different ways. The root is used to treat conditions resulting from an overload of toxins, including heavy metal toxicity. Burdock root is also considered a calming agent, suppressing the flight or flight response activated by stress, caffeine, and refined sugar. In Russia, burdock root oil, called *Repinnoe maslo*, is used to strengthen and encourage new hair growth as a treatment for baldness.

Burdock seed stimulates the reproductive system, lymphatic drainage, and elimination of toxins through the skin. Seed extracts may lower blood sugar levels.

**How to use burdock**

To reap the health benefits of burdock root, the safest and most effective way to take it is to bring 3 Tbsp [45 mL] of dried root to a boil in 2 L [8 cups] of water and simmer 20 minutes. Leave overnight to steep. Strain and pour into a sterilized jar. Refrigerate and drink 1/4 to 1/2 cup [60 to 125 mL] daily. The leaves can also be infused as tea. Use 1 tsp [5 mL] of dried leaves per 1 cup [250 mL] of boiling water and allow tea to steep 10 minutes before drinking.

Burdock root is safe to take on a continuous basis to maintain optimum health and decrease toxic buildup in your body.

The crushed seed is also used as a poultice for bruises. Burdock leaves are used for burns, ulcers, and sores because they contain a soothing emollient.

**Beneficial for cleansing, too**

Primarily, though, burdock root is known as a general cleanser for the body with particular influence on the skin, kidneys, and mucous membranes in the digestive tract, lungs, and sinuses. It is antibacterial, antifungal, and may protect against tumours. Substances present in burdock root help to destroy mutagens, or cancer-causing agents, by reacting with them. After inactivating cancer-causing agents, burdock root works to activate bile production in the liver and increase urine production in the kidneys so that mutagens are eliminated from the system.

"Various parts of the plant—root, seeds, and leaves—are used medically in different ways."

In the language of traditional Chinese medicine and its understanding of the simple energies of plants, burdock seed is considered bitter, a bit sweet, cool, moist, stimulating, dispersing, and softening, and is prescribed as the main remedy for a red and swollen sore throat. The root is used to dry damp conditions whereas the leaves are seen as bitter and cooling.

In herbal medicine worldwide, burdock has been revered as the perfect cleanser for today’s toxic environment. It is definitely much more than a bothersome weed that sticks to your clothes.

Bev Maya is a member of the National Institute of Medical Herbalists, the oldest body of practising medical herbalists in the world, and the American Herbalists Guild.

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