



Positively plantain

Rediscovering the medicinal plants in your own back yard.

Keith Stelling, MNIMH, DipPhyt

Nearly everyone is familiar with plantain although we may not yet have recognized its great medicinal value. It grows readily in our back yards and gardens and we often think of it as a common weed.

Two types of plantain are common throughout the temperate world. One, known as ribwort *Plantago lanceolat*, has spear-shaped leaves about six inches (15 cm) high, with psyllium-shaped seeds on little spikes. The other, called broad-leaved plantain *P. major*, looks similar but has wider leaves. In medieval times, people successfully healed deep wounds by pouring the freshly squeezed juice of plantain into them and binding the wounds' edges together.

Today we know that it is plantain's astringent tannins that make it antihemorrhagic. It has been shown to increase blood clotting. Modern investigators have also found that plantain contains antibacterial substances that are effective against *Staphylococcus* and *Bacillus* bacteria. The medieval custom of using the fresh juice made good sense because the antibiotic properties lose some of their activity when heated.

Plantain is largely ignored in our own time—perhaps because it is freely avail-

able to everyone. Yet countless generations of herbalists have held it in high esteem. The ancient Druids included it among their seven sacred herbs.

Now, more than two thousand years later, modern scientific research has proven that plantain has new relevance to present-day problems. Hildegard von Bingen wrote, circa 1155, that the juice should be used to cure gout. Modern research shows that plantain stimulates the immune system (Wegener, 1999).

In days gone by, both plantain species were used to make healing ointments. Lady Northcote's *Book of Herbs*, (1903), presents an ointment that was once made by a woman of Exeter who employed southernwood, plantain leaves, black currant leaves, angelica, and parsley, chopped, pounded, and simmered in clarified butter, for use on burns and raw surfaces. King Henry VIII of England included plantain in his famous "King's Grace's ointment," "to coole and dry and comfort the Member." Not surprising. Both species contain healing zinc, soothing mucilages, and astringent tannins. The freshly pulped leaves can be applied to varicose ulcers, poorly healing wounds, hemorrhoids, and boils.

Because of its astringency, plantain possesses a drawing action. When the leaves are crushed and held in contact with the skin over an insect bite for half an hour, the inflammation and itching can be avoided. This is because the insect venom is pulled out immediately, before it can be carried to other parts of the body. The widespread availability in nature of this immediate first aid treatment is worth keeping in mind today, when people are fearful about mosquito bites.

The antiseptic and healing properties of plantain also work inside the body. Plantain taken internally improves the condition of the walls of the veins. Drinking the fresh juice has an antiseptic effect upon the urine. Combined with the soothing effect of plantain's mucilages, it is useful in the treatment of cystitis and prostatitis.

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Plantain is even more valuable for respiratory problems, including coughs, asthma, allergies, and bronchial infections. As an expectorant, it soothes coughing and plantain also restores the respiratory mucous membranes.

Research published in the Italian journal *Fitoterapie* makes broad-leaved plantain a thoroughly modern plant: it has the ability to lower cholesterol. This may be partly explained by the fact that plantain drains the liver and kidneys, alleviating congestion in these organs and allowing the liver once again to carry out its normal function in regulating cholesterol.

Dose: The usual dose is 1 tsp (5 ml) plantain per 1 cup (250 ml) boiling

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water taken three times a day. Take 2 to 4 ml of the tincture (1:5, 25-per-cent alcohol) three times daily. The fresh juice can be taken internally at a dose of 1 tbsp (15 ml) with 3 tbsp (45 ml) water, three times a day. You might

want to disguise the taste in fruit juice.

Adverse effects: Allergic reactions to the pollen are recorded among people who are affected by the airborne pollen of grasses. They are uncommon in practice.

Contraindications: A single study sug-



gests that plantain may interfere with either digoxin or with digoxin monitoring.

Here's one final idea from the past for our modern stressed-out unbalanced era. According to Salmon's *Herbal* of 1710, "the liniment made with the juice and oil of roses eases headaches and is good for lunatics."

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