

# Comfrey

These articles appeared in  
the October, November and  
December, 1958 issues of



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Los Angeles 29, Calif.

# Comfrey

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Today medical science is taking a second look at an old-time herbal remedy — comfrey *symphytum* — the leaves and roots of which have been used for centuries as an effective demulcent and astringent.

My interest in this medicinal plant began in the winter of 1956, when I set out a large bed of comfrey in my Yucaipa (Calif.) herb garden. (See my article entitled, *Comfrey for Your Nutritional Garden*, LET'S LIVE, October 1957).

Since then I have used comfrey leaves extensively in my therapeutic *Green Drink*, and the comfrey root, or rhizome, as a poultice to promote the healing of obstinate ulcerous wounds. But before I relate some of the interesting case histories that have come under my observation during the past year, it may prove helpful to review briefly the history of comfrey as a medicinal modality.

## An "Old Woman's Remedy"

In my reading of old books I have found that comfrey has often been spoken of as an "old woman's remedy." Commenting on this interesting fact, Dr. Charles J. Macalister, M.D., F.R.C.P., of Liverpool, Eng., in his informative treatise on this ancient medicinal remedy, explains that the term probably dates back to the time when woman was the "Priestess of Medicine," and was in no case used in a derogatory sense.

"Nursing," declares Dr. Macalister, "is a profession which pre-eminently belongs to woman, and the psychology of the nurse is essentially that of woman, who throughout the ages has been regarded as the possessor of inborn gifts and attributes which render her the natural tender of the weak, and of the maimed and hurt. . . .

"The experience which woman acquired in prehistoric times regarding the care of her offspring was probably associated with some knowledge which would be handed on from mother to daughter. So it would happen that adults appealed to woman as to mother, when smitten with illness. She was the 'Wise Woman' of those days — and it is within the realms of possibility that comfrey was among the 'simples' employed by her, and may truly be called an old or ancient 'woman's remedy.'"

The faith of the common people in comfrey as a healer is well illustrated by the experience of a Lancashire physician who tells of an amusing and slightly embarrassing experience he had back in 1912. He writes: "Three years ago I was called to see a girl with gastric ulcer, and treated the case in the usual orthodox manner. In three weeks the patient was able to return to the mill. When congratulating the mother on her daughter's speedy recovery, the old woman said to me:

"'Do you mind my telling you something, Doctor?' On my replying in the negative, she said:

"Well, Doctor, my girl has never had a drop of *your* medicine, and all she has supped is pints of strong comfrey tea!"

It is interesting to note that this British doctor was not too proud to accept this "old woman's remedy," and ever since he has used comfrey with excellent results in cases involving the gastric mucus membrane.

In my reading I have also found that in Europe the use of comfrey was not confined altogether to "old women" or to the laity, but was at one time held in high repute by the medical profession.

In a letter written to Dr. Macalister in Nov., 1911, Dr. Edward Nicholson of Neuilly, France, declares: "I am quite at one with you in the examination of forgotten 'Worts.' Certainly until the manufacture of the new class of synthetic medicines prevailed, one could count on one's fingers medicines that had not been discovered by old women or savages, and now one finds that some of these synthetic remedies are scientific imitations (however unconsciously) of the 'principals' contained of the old herbals."

### "Old Herbals"

It is interesting to note here some statements regarding the medicinal value of the Comfrey Rhizome as found in some of the 16th Century *Herbals*.

In W. Turner's *Herball* of 1568 we have the following: "Of Comfrey Symphytum, the rootes are good if they be broken and dronken for them that spitte blood, and are bursten. The same, layd to, are good to glewe together freshe woundes. They are also good to be layd to inflammation, and specially of the fundament, with the leaves of groundsell."

In Gerard's *Herball* (1597) he describes the healing qualities of Comfrey in cases of "ulcers of the lungs" and

"ulcers of the kidneies, though they have been of long continuance."

Parkinson, in his *Theatrum Botanicum* (1640), describes the virtues of comfrey as follows: "The rootes of Comfrey, taken fresh, beaten small, spread upon leather, and laid upon any place troubled with the gout, doe presently give ease of the paines; and applied in the same manner, giveth ease to pained joyns, and profiteth very much for running and moist ulcers, gangrenes, mortifications, and the like." (John Parkinson was Apothecary to King James I, and his marble statue can still be seen in Sefton Park, Liverpool.)

Tournefort, in his *Compleat Herbal* (1719) tells the story of a charlatan (a non-licensed practitioner) who "cured a certain person of a malignant ulcer, pronounced to be a cancer by the surgeons, and left by them as incurable, by applying twice a day the root of Comfrey bruised, having first peeled off the external blackish bark or rind; but the cancer was not of above eight or ten weeks standing."

### Popularity declines

According to Dr. Macalister, "By the end of the eighteenth century comfrey seems to have declined in popularity among physicians . . . but it is an interesting fact that in country districts it is still valued by agricultural and other workers on account of its curative properties. When visiting a farm at Tarvin in Cheshire many years ago, I was interested to find that its owner always kept a bed of comfrey in order that he might provide villagers with it when occasion arose."

In his interesting book, *Russian Comfrey*, the British writer, Lawrence D. Hills, refers to *allantoin*, the active thera-

peutic agent found so abundantly in this remarkable plant, as *an internal healer*. He suggests that veterinarians conduct adequate research as to its possibilities in the field of animal husbandry and in the control of the ever prevalent diseases of livestock. Then he adds this thought-provoking sentence: "There may be better and swifter remedies in modern *synthetics* and the *antibiotics* and *sulpha* groups of drugs, but feeding a profitable fodder crop which provides *free precautionary medicine* is good farm economy, even at the expense of the chemical manufacturer."

### Excellent healer

It is interesting to learn that the healing agent, allantoin, is present in both the roots and the leaves of Comfrey, and its value as a cell-proliferant — in making the edges of wounds grow together, healing sores, and taken internally for gastric and duodenal ulcers, and intestinal irritations causing diarrhea — is still recognized in pharmacy.

Justification for the name "sympy-tum" — which means "to make grow together," is found in the farmer's tradition that Comfrey cures *scour*, and that it *prevents and cures* intestinal and digestive disorders in pigs, cattle and horses.

In this connection we are reminded of Researcher Frank Bower's somewhat amusing observation: "What's good for piggies is good for kiddies!" If Comfrey *sympy-tum* will prevent or cure intestinal and digestive disorders (as well as pulmonary diseases) in livestock, would it not likewise perform equally well for the benefit of humans both young and old?

### Impressive testimony

In the fifth edition of *Potter's Cyclo-pedia of Botanical Drugs*, I find the following authoritative testimony, under

the heading: "Comfrey *Symphytum Officinale*: Parts used: Roots and leaves. Action: Demulcent and astringent. Comfrey is very highly esteemed as a remedy in all pulmonary complaints, hemoptysis, and consumption, and forms an ingredient in a large number of herbal preparations. Wherever a mucilinous medicine is required this may be given. It has been used of late by the medical profession as a poultice to promote healing of obstinate ulcerous wounds. A decoction is made by boiling one-half to one ounce of crushed root in one quart of water or milk. Dose, a wine-glassful. The leaves are preferably taken as an infusion prepared in the usual manner. Comfrey leaves subdue every kind of inflammatory swelling when used as a fomentation."

### Clinical observations

In my October column I promised my readers some actual case histories, revealing the power of Comfrey as a *healer*. Recently I was called to the bedside of a young woman who was suffering from a cancer of the right breast (in an advanced stage). Her trouble started three years ago in the form of a lump under the nipple. The cancer then spread rapidly to the glands in the axillary.

The patient belonged to a sect which did not believe in surgery, and the condition had advanced unchecked to the place where her right breast was covered with a large raw cauliflower growth 5 x 6 inches in size. On entering the home I was met with the nauseating odor of malignancy so characteristic in such cases. After the examination, I immediately recommended a Comfrey-leaf poultice, and supplied her mother with Comfrey leaves from my herb garden. Poultices of fresh, crushed leaves were applied several times daily to the large

discharging mass.

Much to the surprise of the patient and her family, within 24 hours after the first poultice had been applied, all the vile odor had disappeared, and in 48 hours the huge sore started to scale over. The swelling under the large raw surface gradually subsided, and in about three weeks the once raw surface was covered with a healthy scale. What is more, much of the dreadful pain that usually accompanies the advanced stages of cancer, disappeared.

But, unfortunately our treatment came too late to save the young woman's life. Metastasis had already carried the dreadful infection into the liver and other internal organs which could not be reached with the Comfrey poultices, and the patient died.

### Cures ulcer

Another interesting case history is reported by Dr. Charles Macalister, of England, as follows: "A striking case was that of a woman, aged 48, who was referred to me by Dr. Douglas Crawford. There was a large ulcer on the dorsum of the foot and another over the lower third of the leg. The bases were in places sloughing and even gangrenous looking, and there was a purulent discharge. She was sent to Dr. Crawford, I understand, for his opinion as to whether the leg should be amputated. The ulcer measured 5 x 4 inches, and had been in existence for five years. Allantoin dressings were commenced on July 25. A week later the surface had cleared and presented healthy granulations, and a rapid growth of epithelium was taking place from all the margins. On August 12 it was manifestly healing, and on August 17, i.e., in 23 days this huge ulcer was reduced to the size of a pinhead. The scar was healthy and

sound. The patient was kept in bed for two weeks, and after her discharge it remained healthy and well. . . ."

### Used on burns

"I might quote many cases of various kinds which clearly confirmed the cell-proliferative qualities of allantoin. Among these were several cases of varicose ulcers. It was also found that burns and scalds of the lesser degrees were very useful fields for observation."

In the year 1911, Dr. R. W. Murray (Hon. Surgeon Liverpool Hospital) confirmed the value of allantoin as a cell proliferant as follows: "Towards the end of last year there was an explosion at a factory in the neighborhood of the hospital, and we were called upon to treat a large number of men who were severely burnt on the heads, forearms, and face. The burns were mostly of the second and third degree, and for about a week they were dressed with gauze soaked either in a solution of picric acid or in a solution of iodine.

"Dr. Macalister asked me to try dressing them with allantoin, and kindly provided us with a quantity of it. In the first instance it was tried on two or three cases only; but the results were so satisfactory and so convincing to house surgeons, dressers, and nurses, that dressing with allantoin solution soon became general. It not only stimulates epithelial growth, but 'cleans up' sloughing surfaces in a remarkable fashion."

With such authoritative and glowing medical testimony regarding the healing power of the herb Comfrey and its miracle-working derivative — allantoin, all of us should heed the counsel of the wise man of old who wrote: "He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and the herb for the service of man." (Psalm

104:14.) Yes, my friends, "there are simple herbs that can be used for the recovery of the sick. . . . There are herbs that will tide over many apparently serious difficulties — and they leave no injurious effects in the system."

In our own previous articles we have given our readers a brief history of the wonderful plant — Comfrey. We have tried to tell you some of the ways that Comfrey has been used during the past few centuries, and how it can help us today by providing a gentle, yet effective healing agent, even in such difficult conditions as tuberculosis, ulcers of the lungs, ulcers of the stomach, ulcers of the kidneys, severe burns, bone fractures, gangrene, neurosis of the tissues, and tumors (both benign and malignant).

We have told you about allantoin — the active therapeutic agent found in both the leaves and the roots of Comfrey, and its almost magic qualities as a cell proliferant, demulcent and astringent.

As a result of these stories about Comfrey, scores of inquiries have come in to us asking for *more specific* information on how to apply the Comfrey leaves, and how much to use in various situations.

### How to prepare

In response to these requests, this column will be devoted largely to ways and means of preparing Comfrey leaves or roots as an internal medicine, or in the form of a poultice or fomentation in cases involving open wounds or ulcers, burns, insect bites, etc.

In cases of obstinate ulcers, gangrene, tumors, burns, open wounds, skin cancer, or inflammation caused by insect bites, the Comfrey leaves can be pre-

pared for the poultice by putting them through a juicer. However, as the Comfrey leaves contain no juice, but a thick mucilaginous substance, like Okra, the macerated leaves are gathered from the basket of the juicer following the operation, and not from the spout. The mass of triturated Comfrey leaves can then be spread on a cloth and applied to the infected area.

If no electric juicer is available, one can prepare the Comfrey leaves in a mortar with a pestle, similar to that used by druggists in compounding various medicinal substances.

Some of my friends have prepared the Comfrey leaves for the poultice by placing them on a board, using a hammer to macerate them. In making a large poultice, I would suggest that from 10 to 12 medium size leaves be prepared as indicated above.

### To make Comfrey tea

In preparing Comfrey tea, I take four small, fresh leaves, cut them up and steep them as I would tea. In using the roots of Comfrey, according to *Potter's Cyclopedie of Botanical Drugs*, a decoction is made by boiling one-half to one ounce of crushed root in one quart of water. Dose: One wine-glassful (four-six ounces).

In cases of gastric ulcer, internal tumors, or lung ailments, this tea should be used in liberal quantities every day. In cases of tuberculosis of the lungs or gastric ulcers, *raw* Comfrey leaves can also be used very effectively in my therapeutic *Green Drink*. (See formula on page 119 of the book, *Live Food Juices*.) In preparing the *Green Drink*, I use from four to six medium size leaves in each batch of the liquid medicine.

### Eaten as spinach

As a blood purifier, Comfrey has been

widely used in European countries for centuries, and is highly recommended in old medical books and herbals. The Europeans cooked the leaves and ate them as we do spinach or beet greens. But I prefer to use the leaves *raw* in my *Green Drink*.

By the way, as many of my readers already know, pure blood builds healthy tissue, and if Comfrey were used for no other reason than to help keep the blood-stream pure, it is well worth the effort to grow and use this plant freely in the diet.

#### Easy to grow

I have found Comfrey very easy to grow. Planted in rich soil, surrounded by a heavy straw mulch, and given plenty of water, you will find Comfrey an all-year-around source of the same vital elements that we have in alfalfa, parsley, and other medicinal herbs. One advantage offered by Comfrey is that the plants are highly resistant to the common pests that frequently attack parsley and alfalfa. It should have an honored place in every home garden.

#### Powerful — but gentle

It is an interesting fact that ordinary antiseptics with strong germicidal action, have a tendency to destroy or inhibit new tissue growth. It is good to know that allantoin, the active agent in Comfrey, does not have this destructive effect on the delicate body tissues — but contrariwise, *helps to build new, healthy cells*. According to Dr. Charles Macalister, "Allantoin is not an antiseptic in the usual acceptation of the term, and its action in this respect must depend on some influence brought to bear upon the cells, whereby their *resistance, stability, and immunity* are established and their proliferation (growth) promoted."

In a letter to the *British Medical Journal* (January 3, 1912), Dr. R. W. Mur-

ray, (Hon. Surgeon, Liverpool Northern Hospital) confirmed the value of allantoin as a cell proliferant. In cases of severe burns (referred to in my November column), it not only stimulated epithelial growth, but *cleaned up* sloughing surfaces in a most remarkable manner. "This cleaning up process is of course essential if healing is to occur, because healthy cell proliferation will not take place over septic surfaces; and it was essential to determine whether allantoin was destructive to micro-organisms, or *established conditions in the cells which rendered them immune to micro-organisms.*" Experiments demonstrated that far from being a *poisonous* antiseptic, allantoin possesses *no toxic qualities*, and rather *favors* than *inhibits* the culture growth of organisms.

#### Interesting case history

Recently a most interesting case history came under my observation. A middle-aged woman came to me with a large malignant ulcer below the eye and close to the nose. I prescribed a Comfrey poultice, and the *Green Drink* containing Comfrey leaves. Soon after the application of the Comfrey leaf poultice, the painful swelling subsided, and rapid improvement was noted. Today, only a few months after the initial treatment, there is a complete healing over of the infected area, and the malignant ulcer has apparently disappeared.

When such simple remedies as we have noted above, will produce such dramatic results in so short a time, it tends to confirm the almost incredible reports of the miracle-working power of Comfrey as told by Dr. Charles Macalister in his book, which indicates that Comfrey contains some substance capable of controlling and stabilizing cell growth.

For those of my readers who may

have become interested in a further study of the medicinal qualities and healing power of Comfrey, may I suggest that you obtain a copy of Dr. Macalister's 60-page book, entitled: *Narrative of an Investigation Concerning an*

*Ancient Medicinal Remedy, and Its Modern Utilities* \* recently reproduced by photo-lithography, and published by the Lee Foundation For Nutritional Research, Milwaukee 3, Wisconsin. Your further study will be greatly rewarded.

THE END

\* Price - \$1.00 .

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Special Reprint 12-58

LEE FOUNDATION FOR NUTRITIONAL RESEARCH  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201