

Asclepias tuberosa

[Synonyms : *Asclepias decumbens*]

PLEURISY ROOT is a perennial. Native to the warmer eastern regions of North America it has small, orange-yellow flowers.

It is also known as Archangel, *Bokay* (American Indian), Butterfly flower, Butterfly milk weed, Butterfly root, Butterfly weed, Canada root, Chiger flower, Chigger flower, Chigger weed, Colic root, Flame weed, Flux root, Flycatcher, Gay butterflies, Indian bokay, Indian nosy, Indian paint, Indian paintbrush, Indian plume, Indian posy, Indian potato, Jewel weed, *Karvasilkkiryrtti* (Finnish), *Maka saka* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian), Milkweed, Orange apocynum, Orange milkweed, Orange milkweed root, Orange root, *Orange sidenört* (Swedish), Orange swallow-wort, Rubber root, Silkgrass, Silkweed, Swallow-wort, Tuberos rooted swallow-wort, Tuber root, White root, Windroot, Windward root, Windweed, and Yellow milkweed; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of 'let me go'.

Warning – fresh leaf tea can cause vomiting. Very large doses of the whole plant can cause diarrhoea, purging, vomiting and nausea. It can be poisonous for some birds and some livestock.

Tuberosa means 'tuberous' with reference to its roots.

The name Butterfly weed arises because of the butterfly's exceptional attraction to these flowers. It is understood to draw many different kinds including Swallowtails, Cabbage, Fritillary and Monarch. Larvae of the latter rely on the nectar as their main food. Apparently it is this food that makes the emerging caterpillars taste sufficiently unpleasant to give them some protection from predatory birds that will only try feeding on them once.

In the western United States several Indian tribes ate the boiled, young seed pods with buffalo meat, they cooked the roots as vegetables, and they made a form of sugar from the flowers. In Canada other Indian tribes prepared and ate the tender young shoots like garden asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*).

North American Indians used the flowers to produce a yellow dye with which they coloured their baskets. The stalks were also used for fibre to make bowstrings.

The Cherokee tribe used the fibrous stems for making belts.

During certain religious ceremonies people in the Appalachians administered a tea made from the leaves that would cause vomiting. Pleurisy root also played a role in formal rituals performed by the Navajo and the Omaha Indian tribes.

The plant seems to have attained a special place in Iroquois respect as the root in infusion or poultice was applied to the legs of runners (and to their shoes) to give them stamina.

For several North American Indian tribes including the Menominee and the Omaha pleurisy root was particularly highly regarded for its medicinal qualities. The ground root was applied to wounds and bruises, and it was also an ingredient in other remedies. The Cherokee, Ponca, Mohican, Delaware and Omaha tribes all used the plant for treating various lung problems, particularly pleurisy. For the Cherokee tribe it was a useful medicine for treating pain, diarrhoea and some heart problems as well, the Delaware Indians used it for rheumatism, some of the Navajo prescribed it for influenza, and the

Rappahannock tribe treated snake bites with it.

Medicinally, the dried root (as its name implies) has been recommended by North American herbalists for the treatment of various respiratory disorders not least pleurisy (for which it can ease pain and breathing difficulties) as well as colds, and catarrh. It has also been used for tuberculosis (particularly in the southern United States) dysentery, diarrhoea, windy colic, indigestion, rheumatism and eczema.

Although its medicinal qualities are no longer recognized officially in the United States it is still valued in North American and European folk medicine. Today its prime use continues to be in the treatment of pleurisy.