

*Plantago major*

[Synonyms : *Plantago asiatica*, *Plantago borysthenica*, *Plantago dregeana*, *Plantago erosa*, *Plantago halophila*, *Plantago hasskarlii*, *Plantago incisa*, *Plantago latifolia*, *Plantago major* var. *intermedia*, *Plantago major* var. *pachyphylla*, *Plantago major* var. *pilgeri*, *Plantago major* var. *scopulorum*, *Plantago officinarum*, *Plantago vulgaris*]

**GREATER PLANTAIN** is a perennial. Native to Asia and Europe it has tiny greenish-white or greenish-purple flowers.

It is also known as *Åkergröblad* (Swedish), *Bartang* (Urdu), Bird's meat, Birdseed, *Bizbula kbira* (Maltese), *Biz'r dinbil* (Arabic), *Breëblaar Plantago* (Afrikaans), *Breitwegerich* (German), Broad leaf, Broad leaf plantain, Broad-leaved plantain, Broadway leaves, Buckhorn plantain, Canary flower, Canary food, Canary seed, *Carrajó* (Portuguese), Cart track plant, *Chantage* (Portuguese), Cocks, Common plantain, *Copóg Phádraig* (Irish Gaelic), *Corrijó* (Portuguese), Cow grass, Cuckoo's bread, Devil's shoestring, Dooryard plantain, *Ekur anjing* (Malay), Englishman's foot, Englishman's weed, Found-leaved plantain, *Gårdsgroblad* (Swedish), *Glat Vejbred* (Danish), *Grand plantain* (French), Great plantain, Great waybrede, *Groblad* (Swedish), *Grosser Wegerich* (German), Hardheads, Healing blade, Hen plant, *Heudieb* (German), *Isafghol* (Kashmiri), *Jitrocel větší* (Czech), Johnsmas pairs, *Ki urat* (Sundanese), *Lahuriya* (Hindi), Lamb's foot, Large leaf, Lark seed, *Llwynhidydd Mawr* (Welsh), *Llyden y Ffordd* (Welsh), Millet, *Ototototan* (Indonesian), *Piantain* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Piharatamo* (Finnish), Plantago, Plantain (English, French), *Plantain majeure* (French), *Planten* (Creole), *Pliantain* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Pony's tails, Poverty grass, Psyllium, *Queue de rat* (French), Ratstail, Rat-tail plantain, Ratten tails, Rib grass, Ribwort, Ripple girs, Ripple grass, Ripple-seed plantain, Round-leaved plantain, *Sangka-buwah* (Javanese), *Sauohr* (German), *Sawdl Crist* (Welsh), *Schafszunge* (German), Silkplant, *Sinie maka* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian), *Skorocel väčší* (Slovak), Slan-lus, Snakeweed, *Tanchagem* (Portuguese), Traveller's foot, Waaverin-leaf, Wabran-leaf, Wayberry, Waybread, Waybroad, Wayburn-leaf, Wayfron, Wayside plantain, Wegbreed, *Wegbreit* (German), *Wegerich* (German), White man's foot, Wibrow, and Wibrow-worrou.

Apparently an average plant can produce 13,000 to 15,000 seeds and of these 60-90% will thrive. It is hardly surprising therefore that it is considered by many to be one of the very hardiest of all invasive plants (commonly termed 'weed') in the world.

*Major* is derived from Latin *maior* (greater) meaning 'greater, bigger or larger'.

In the Highlands of Scotland it has been called Slan-lus meaning 'the plant of healing'. Several of its names not least White man's foot are explained by the fact that greater plantain has been introduced worldwide.

Greater plantain with chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*), crab apple (*Malus baccata*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare* var. *dulce*), mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*), thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*), watercress (*Nasturtium officinale*) and wood betony (*Stachys officinalis*) was one of the Nine Sacred plants for the Anglo-Saxons. (The ninth may have been sainfoin, *Onobrychis viciifolia*.) They believed these plants could give protection against evil.

Legend relates how a young girl watched for her lover for so long at the roadside that she was transformed into a plantain or waybread (a name of Saxon origin). From that time it was said that the waybread became a cuckoo every seventh year.

Greater plantain was not only one of the plants singled out for a part in activities on St. John's Day (Midsummer Day on 24<sup>th</sup> June) in France especially but it also performed a role in some European divination practices.

Its appearance in medieval Christian art is as a symbol of the 'well-trodden path' of the multitude that sought out Christ.

Young leaves have been cooked and eaten for thousand of years. In Europe archaeologists have found seeds in Danish remains excavated from peat bogs. The Chinese have used the seeds to make jellies, and they have eaten the young leaves as a vegetable.

The plant was used in Europe as a strewing herb.

Records suggest that European children at play have fashioned various make-believe musical instruments out of the tough leaves by exposing the sturdy veins, including violins, guitars or banjos.

At some point greater plantain reached North America and records show that it became familiar to many North American Indian tribes. Both the Mohican and Cherokee Indians and some of the Keresan ate the leaves as a vegetable.

For the Chippewa tribe the ground root carried on one's person provided protection from snakes.

Different parts of the plant were also appreciated by many of the North American tribes including some of the Navajo for their medicinal qualities. Cherokee Indians used it to treat dysentery, bowel disorders and headaches, while the Iroquois tribe took it for some lung problems and the Carrier Indians used it as a cough remedy. Both the Costanoan and Rappahannock tribes prescribed the plant for easing fever, and the Iroquois and some of the Keresan valued it as a remedy for various blood disorders. It offered a treatment for colds and pneumonia in the Paiute tribe, and Meskwaki and Cherokee Indians all included it in their remedies for some urinary problems. Various female ailments were treated with it by the Delaware, Iroquois and Cherokee Indians. The Meskwaki and Shoshoni both turned to it as a remedy for fluid retention. The plant was used by Shuswap Indians to cause sweating, Carrier and Costanoan tribes took it as a laxative, and the Thompson tribe used it for treating piles. It was a remedy for stomach upsets among the Nitinaht, Isleta, Iroquois, Shoshoni and Carrier Indian tribes, and the Abnaki, Chippewa and Shoshoni Indians all used it to ease rheumatism. While the Kawaiisu Indians used it to treat some ear problems, the Shinnecock and Cherokee tribes both turned to it for various eye ailments. Records indicate however that its widest use was probably in relation to the skin. Wounds were treated with it by the Mahuna, Shoshoni, some of the Algonkin, the Hesquiat, Nitinaht, Ponca and Paiute tribes and it was applied to burns by the Meskwaki, some of the Algonkin, the Mohican and the Cherokee Indians. Some of the Chippewa tribe, and the Cherokee and the Mohican tribes all used it as an antidote for snake bites and for insect bites. In addition the Shinnecock, Shoshoni, Mohican, Kwakiutl, Cherokee, Chippewa, Iroquois, Potawatomi, Hesquiat, Thompson, Yurok, Shuswap, Meskwaki, Nitinaht and Okanagan-Colville tribes all relied upon it for treating a range of skin problems.

In literature greater plantain (under its many different names) is well represented. The famous English playwright and poet, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) mentions it several times in his works including in *Troilus and Cressida*

.....when their rhymes,  
Full of protest, of oath, and big compare,  
Want similes, truth tir'd with iteration, -

As true as steel, as plantage to the moon,  
As sun to day, .....

Then the well-known American poet, Henry Longfellow (1807-1882), wrote in *Hiawatha*  
Wheresoe'er they tread, beneath them  
Springs a flower unknown among us  
Springs the 'White man's foot' in blossom.

Both small wild birds and caged birds enjoy the seeds.

There have been many stories over the centuries involving other creatures than man that have been cured of poisoning by eating greater plantain. Pliny the Elder (23-79), the Roman natural historian, states in his writing that greater plantain can cure rabies. While Desiderius Erasmus (c.1466-1536), the celebrated Dutch humanist and scholar, includes in his works a story in which a toad is bitten by a spider and to counter the poison in the bite the toad immediately eats a leaf of greater plantain. Another story from the United States relates how a dog received a bite from a rattlesnake and, despite the pain it inflicted upon the poor animal, a poultice of plantain juice and salt was applied to the wound – and the dog completely recovered.

Greater plantain is of some value to Summer walkers as it is one of the plants whose leaves rubbed on nettle stings (*Urtica dioica*) can supply immediate relief – and juice squeezed from its stalks can ease the discomfort even more quickly. It is even said to be capable of helping to heal poison ivy rash.

Plant extracts are used by the cosmetics industry today.

Medicinally, the leaves were used in England by the Anglo-Saxons and much later the Elizabethans for curing headaches – however the former performed this remedy by binding leaves to the head with red wool. In the past in many countries in the world these leaves have also been used to treat haemorrhages, diarrhoea, bronchitis, fever, epilepsy, diabetes, fluid retention, jaundice, dysentery, kidney disorders, tuberculosis, catarrh, coughs and worms, as well as ulcers, eye, skin and oral inflammation, insect bites, piles and beyond anything else wounds. Herbalists used also to recommend the juice for various complaints including syphilis. Although the plant may be spurned today by horticulturists and gardeners in the Western world it still attracts a strong following for its use in folk medicine in countries as far apart as Africa and Vietnam. Today it can be used internally as a mild laxative and for treating fluid retention and diarrhoea and it can be applied externally to ease the pain of piles or insect stings. Greater plantain can also be used in homoeopathic treatments. In Chinese medicine greater plantain is used as a remedy in particular for some forms of ulcer and for dysentery, urinary diseases and liver inflammation.