

Symphytum officinale

COMMON COMFREY is a perennial. Native to Asia and Europe it has blue, purple, pink or yellowish-white flowers.

It is also known as Abraham Isaac and Jacob, *Äkta vallört* (Swedish), Alum, Ass ear, *Arznei-Beinwell* (German), Backwort, *Beinwell* (German), Blackwort, Boneset, Bruisewort, Bruisewort gumplant, Bugloss, Church bells, Coffee flowers, Comfrey, Common conifrey, Confrey, Consolida, Consormol, *Consoude officinale* (French), Consound, *Dail Cwmffri* (Welsh), *Echter Beinwell* (German), *Gemeiner Beinwell* (German), Gooseberry-pie, Gum plant, Healing herb, Knitback, Knitbone, *Kostihoj lekársky* (Slovak), *Kostival lékářský* (Czech), Nipbone, *Oreille d'âne* (French), Pigweed, *Rohtoraunioryrtti* (Finnish), Salsify, Saracen's foot, *Simfita oficina* (Esperanto), Slippery root, Snake, Suckers, Sweet suckers, *Vallört* (Swedish), Wallwort, *Wallwurz* (German), *Widnet il-ghomor* (Maltese), and Woundwort.

Warning – due to the current conflicting views on the demerits of the plant its consumption should perhaps be avoided. Handling the leaves can cause itches and blistering.

Officinale means 'of the shop (usually the apothecary's or herbalist's)'. Certain plants used for medicinal purposes, whether of actual or legendary value, were kept readily available and acquired this name.

The name Consound means 'against swooning'. While the common name Knitbone came arose its ability to hold a mending bone in place (the powdered root mixed with water forms a sticky mass that can be pasted round the fracture).

The edible leaves (particularly the young ones) and the stems have been cooked as a vegetable by country people for centuries and in Britain they have also been used as a flavouring for cakes known as 'Comfrey Cakes' and other food. Even today battered and fried common comfrey leaves are still a Bavarian specialty. Its roots have been used to make coffee which some authorities contend not only tastes similar to that made from coffee beans but also does not have any harmful side-effects. Comfrey has provided on occasion a flavouring for home-made wine too.

European continental tanners have in the past used a strong decoction of the plant in the tanning process. The Turkish spinners of the world-renowned angora wool extracted a gummy substance from common comfrey for use when spinning the goat fleeces.

Common comfrey's importance is illustrated not only by the fact that it would have been a familiar sight in monastery gardens but also that in the 17th Century common comfrey plants accompanied some of the early settlers on their hazardous journey to North America when space would have been at a premium.

The North American Cherokee Indians absorbed common comfrey into their medicinal repertoire. They used it during childbirth and also as a laxative. They prescribed it for dysentery, heartburn and venereal disease, and they also applied it to bruises and sprains.

Research continues on how best to extract and use common comfrey's protein (particularly in the Third World) for both human and animal consumption. It is already gaining increasing significance in Africa as animal fodder. But there is a note of caution as some recent reports suggest that there could be dangers in consuming common comfrey tea or leaves in salad in too large a quantity.

Known to the ancient Greeks and to the Romans it was medicinally one of their most valued plants. The powdered root was famous for setting fractures (when left to dry on leather it formed a rigid cast) and the roots have also been used to treat diarrhoea, dysentery, intestinal ailments, coughs and bleeding from the lungs, as well as sore breasts, ulcers, bruises and wounds – even to the present day. It has also been recommended by herbalists for treating rheumatism and skin diseases such as eczema. Today it can be an ingredient in proprietary medicines and it is used in homoeopathic treatments.