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# COMFREY (Symphytum officinale): A healer of wounds, bruises and bones

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### By Steph Zabel

### Herbalist, Ethnobotanist and Educator

September's herb is a bit different than all of our past monthly plant profiles. This month we focus on the great green healer, comfrey. But, unlike all the other plants we've covered here, comfrey is meant for external use only, rather than for taking internally. (And I'll explain why as we go along.)

Perhaps you've seen this lush, leafy plant growing in a garden, or even alongside the edge of a forest, where it has escaped cultivation and is happily growing in the partial shade. If you walk along the Somerville bike path you are sure to see some half-wild comfrey growing along the edges. In the summertime you'll notice it's lovely violet-hued flowers which are born on a spiral-shaped stalk and hang downwards like small bells.





This lovely plant is originally native to Europe but it's commonly found naturalized throughout parts of North

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Comfrey was once commonly called Knitbone because of its amazing ability to heal broken bones and "knit" them back together again. The botanical name, Symphytum, means "to unite."

The incredible healing action this plant has on broken bones and wounds comes from a constituent contained in the leaf and root called allantoin. This compound is a cell proliferant which helps to regenerate wounded areas of the body and speed up new healthy cell growth.

Comfrey is one of my favorite herbs for bruises, especially, and I have seen it work its magic overnight. I once witnessed the external application of comfrey placed on terrible blue-black colored bruises and after being on the effected area for one night (as a poultice) the bruises quickly started to fade and went from black in color to a pale yellow. It was amazing to see this transformation happen so rapidly.



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The plant is also excellent to use topically on sprains, pulled muscles, swellings and fractures. It is a wonderful first aid herb to have on hand in case you or someone you know twists their ankle. A foot soak or a poultice of comfrey can bring relief and help speed up the healing process.

But comfrey must be used with caution and respect. It is such an excellent and speedy wound-healing remedy that it actually should not be used on deep wounds or lacerations. It could potentially heal the top layer of skin before the bottom layer, resulting in an abscess. So please do avoid comfrey for major skin wounds, and use it only for bruises, sprains and minor cuts and scratches.

In addition, much debate surrounds the safety of consuming comfrey internally, even though for centuries it was used in Greek medicine and by European physicians for respiratory and digestive issues. The controversy is due to the fact that the plant contains pyrrolizidine alkaloids that can be harmful to the liver in high doses. These alkaloids can do damage — especially to people who already have a compromised liver — so it is advised to use comfrey topically and not internally to be on the safe side.

That said, there is no reason to fear this plant when it is used correctly. Just don't use comfrey on deep open wounds, and avoid all internal use.

### **HOW TO USE:**

There are many ways to use comfrey topically on the body through compresses, poultices, liniments and infused oils. One of my favorite ways is to make a simple compress. If you've never made one before, it may sound daunting but it is actually very straightforward. A compress is simply a cloth soaked in an herbal tea (or sometimes a tincture or oil) and then placed on the the body. The skin absorbs the healing properties of the liquid and penetrates to the affected area. Compresses can be applied warm or cold. Warm compresses will be more

relaxing, help with muscle tightness and bring more blood to the area. Cold compresses are constricting, slow down circulation and can help reduce bleeding and pain.



### **HOW TO MAKE A COMPRESS:**

- 1. Make a strong comfrey tea, using 2 Tablespoons of dried herb per cup of hot water. Strain out the herb after 10-15 minutes.
- 2. Let the tea cool if making a cold compress, or use it right away (at a comfortable temperature) for a warm compress. The tea can be heated back up if necessary.

- 3. Soak a clean piece of fabric or a washcloth in the tea and squeeze out the excess liquid.
- 4. Place the soaked cloth on the affected area and, if possible, wrap it around the body. Let it sit for at least 10 minutes. Re-soak the cloth as needed.

Steph Zabel, MSc, is an herbalist and educator who helps urban dwellers connect with the plant world. She teaches herbal classes, is available for individual wellness consultations, and is also the founder of HERBSTALK, Boston's community herbal conference. Learn more about her work at: www.flowerfolkherbs.com (http://www.flowerfolkherbs.com) and www.herbstalk.org (http://www.herbstalk.org).

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