

# Eat Your Weeds!

by Howard Woodwind Morningstar, MD

Let's go on a walk through the fields, gardens and meadows around us and see what beneficial weeds are growing on this fine spring day. Picture yourself with me as we step outside my front door in the beautiful Siskiyou Mountains.

We immediately come upon a patch of stinging nettles (*Urtica dioica*) vigorously sprouting up from the earth. Nettles have amazing root systems that spread through the subsoil in search of trace minerals, which they bring to the surface in their leaves and stems. These bristling towers of vitality are perhaps the most nutritious of all plants. Their formic acid stingers protect them from being eaten by woodland animals, so that when they compost naturally at the years' end they serve to nourish the entire plant community.

Nettles have a broad range of useful medicinal properties. They are rich in histamine inhibitors, especially helpful for those suffering from hay fever and allergies. They contain other anti-inflammatory compounds which help heal inflammations such as eczema, asthma, colitis and arthritis. Nettles are also mildly diuretic, and combine well with other herbs such as dandelion for high blood pressure and fluid retention. They contain astringent compounds that are beneficial for treating internal bleeding, diarrhea and chronic cystitis.

Nettles help support and balance the entire glandular system, and will often help remedy irregular menses, chronic fatigue and adrenal exhaustion. In fact, because of their high iron and trace mineral content, nettles are a wonderful spring tonic for almost anyone.

It's easy to gather young nettle leaves- just wear gloves when you do! You can eat them steamed, in soups and stews, or brew a rich and tasty tonic tea. If you don't have nettles growing where you live, plant them at the edge of your garden or in a container, as their growth is very robust and they spread "like weeds".

Growing right under and amongst the nettles I can see new starbursts of Plantain (*Plantago major*). This inconspicuous plant's wound healing properties are legendary for relieving pain, swelling and itching of skin injuries including nettle stings, burns, cuts and bruises. It's amazing how the nettles' cure is right at its feet. Try crushing fresh plantain leaves and applying the pulp directly to insect or spider bites as a field dressing. Or, you can combine plantain with olive oil, beeswax and other healing herbs such as chickweed and calendula to make a soothing skin ointment.

Plantain's astringent qualities help relieve diarrhea, hemorrhoids, ulcers and excessive menstrual bleeding. It also is a valuable expectorant that soothes inflamed mucous membranes when you're suffering from a sore throat or bronchitis. For internal use it's best to make an infusion from the whole plant before it flowers.

With another few steps I come upon two more “weeds” that have been used for thousands of years to staunch bleeding: Shepherd's Purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*) and Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*). Both can be powdered and applied with pressure to fresh wounds. Used internally, they're beneficial for treating internal hemorrhages, diarrhea and dysentery.

Yarrow is also an excellent sweat-inducing diaphoretic for lowering high fevers. In addition, it's a valuable circulatory tonic that can lower elevated blood pressure by improving muscle tone in peripheral blood vessels.

Shepherd's purse is high in blood clot-promoting vitamin K, and is especially indicated for treating nosebleeds and excessively heavy menses. Midwives have used it for countless centuries to treat postpartum hemorrhages. Internally, it's best taken as a tea every hour or so when treating acute bleeding. Externally, the crushed herb may be applied to bruised or strained muscles as well as swollen arthritic joints.

Next, I come across Burdock (*Arctium lappa*), a robust biennial herb whose clinging burrs help it spread rapidly through hedges, meadows and gardens. In Japan, Burdock is called Gobo root and is a cultivated vegetable.

Burdock root is an excellent liver, kidney and digestive tonic. Used internally, its blood purifying effects help the body heal chronic inflammations, infections and skin eruptions. I often combine burdock with red clover, yellow dock and cleavers when treating the root causes of psoriasis, eczema and other skin problems. The thick leaves can be crushed and applied as a soothing poultice to skin eruptions and inflamed joints.

It's best to harvest burdock after the plant's first year of growth and to make a decoction by simmering an ounce of the root in a quart of water for ten minutes.

Cleavers (*Galium aparine*) is a sticky and lanky plant found abundantly in most gardens and wherever there is moist, rich soil. It's perhaps the best lymphatic and blood purifying tonic available. Cleavers is especially indicated for treating swollen glands and skin eruptions caused by lymphatic congestion. Its combined diuretic and anti-inflammatory properties provide excellent relief for chronic cystitis and prostatitis.

In another step I come upon the new leaves of Yellow Dock (*Rumex crispus*) bursting through the spring earth. The roots of this common weed combine alterative, laxative, and liver tonic qualities. Yellow dock cleanses the blood by stimulating bile flow, especially helpful when treating chronic skin and arthritic problems. It's also quite rich in bio-available iron, and is used as a blood building tonic.

Among the dock leaves I find the bright and delicate greenery of Chickweed (*Stellaria media*), a common weed that frequently grows in moist places and gardens.

Chickweed is commonly used as an external remedy for cuts, wounds and especially for itchy and ulcerated skin. You can bruise the fresh leaves and apply them as a poultice wherever needed. It's been used for millennia as a remedy for rheumatism and other inflammatory conditions. For internal use, eat the tasty fresh greens raw, or try making a drink of fresh chickweed in the blender along with carrot, apple or other fresh juices.

Just across the driveway there's the familiar sight of Broom (*Sarothamnus scoparius*). This aggressively spreading shrub often invades and takes over meadows. Its bright yellow flowering tops contain a wide variety of drugs that act upon the circulatory system. Broom is a strong diuretic that also increases the efficiency of the heartbeat. This combination is especially helpful when heart muscle weakness causes edema and congestive heart failure.

I can also see young St. John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) shoots competing with Broom and the meadow grass. This amazing plant, considered by ranchers to be a troublesome weed, has a variety of beneficial effects on the nervous system. Its sedative, analgesic and nervine properties make it especially useful for treating anxiety, tension and neuralgias such as diabetic neuropathy. It also can ease painful inflammations such as fibro-myalgia and sciatica.

St. John's wort is currently the most widely used anti depressant medicine in the United States, and is often as effective as drugs prescribed for this common ailment. It may be applied externally as an oil or salve to speed healing of wounds, bruises, varicose veins and burns. Next I come across the wooly leaves of Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*). The yellow flowers of this noble plant are an excellent respiratory remedy, especially useful for reducing bronchial inflammation while thinning mucous and stimulating expectoration. Its anti-inflammatory and demulcent properties make it ideal for treating hay fever, bronchitis and asthma. Mullein flowers extracted in olive oil are used to soothe and heal ear inflammations and infections.

Growing right alongside the mullein is wild lettuce, also called opium lettuce (*Lactuca virosa*). This common weed's leaves contain a milky latex that has sedative, anti-spasmodic and analgesic properties. It's a valuable remedy for insomnia, restlessness, headaches and other painful conditions due to muscle spasms. Wild lettuce extract is also very helpful for relieving irritated coughs, colic and painful menstrual cramps.

In another few steps we're at the garden gate where we encounter the spring's new growth of Couch grass (*Agropyron repens*). This very aggressive perennial grass spreads through its rhizomes, and will take over a tilled garden in no time. The medicinal rhizomes are very rich in minerals including silica and iron. Its unique combination of demulcent, diuretic and anti microbial properties make it especially beneficial for soothing urinary tract inflammations and infections such as kidney stones, cystitis, urethritis and prostatitis.

Another beneficial "weed" that seems to plague anyone with a lawn is Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*). All parts of this powerful plant are medicinal: roots, leaves and flowers. Because dandelion leaf is one of nature's best sources of potassium, it's an ideally balanced diuretic for

treating congestive heart failure. It's myriad medicinal properties include diuretic, liver tonic, laxative and digestive tonic. This herb is perhaps the most valuable of all liver tonics, excellent whenever a potent yet safe blood purifier is needed. You can eat the young spring leaves in salad, or make an infusion from the whole plant later on in the season.

If dandelion had just recently been discovered in a remote jungle it would be considered the latest and greatest "new" herb. It's ironic and sad to see how many people perceive this awesome healing plant as an enemy, and spend so much time digging it up, or worse, spraying toxic herbicides to eliminate its bright yellow flowers from their lawns.

Which brings me to the question: What is a "weed" anyway? I submit that a weed is a plant growing in a place where one wants something else to grow. One person's nuisance "weed" is another's precious healing medicine. The difference is simply in one's perception.

These common medicinal "weeds" have been part of our ancestral healing heritage since before the dawn of time. They are mother nature's healing gifts, growing by their own grace. They are always available to us, if only we open up our eyes and see them for what they are.

So, how do we want to see the world around us? Do we spray and poison a world full of "weeds", or do we feast on mother nature's herbal gifts and be healed? Whatever we decide, it's certain that the energy we project into nature will surely be reflected back to us.

As always, this overview is presented for educational purposes only. For advice regarding specific health conditions please consult a qualified health care professional. The mindful use of herbal medicines specifically promotes a greater harmony between human culture and Mother Earth. Ultimately, it is this partnership that brings success in all healing endeavors.

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