

Comfrey contains a great deal of mucilage (which soothes inflammation) and allantoin (which promotes cell growth and aids healing). The boiled leaves, applied as a poultice, would set hard, making a good splint. Several authors repeated the boast that it healed so well and so quickly that if you grated some fresh comfrey root into a stew, it would join the chunks of meat together.

Several species of comfrey grow wild in Europe, and plants taken to New England soon naturalised there, too. Britain's native common comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*) has large, slightly rough leaves – Culpeper says they will make your hands itch – and pale cream or pinkish nodding flowers in a coiled raceme, like all the borage family. Russian comfrey (*Symphytum x uplandicum*) was introduced to Britain in 1870 as a fodder crop, though livestock are not very keen on it. Other introduced species have hybridised, backcrossed and escaped, so there is a range of flower colours and features among the plants growing wild on roadsides and in fields. Comfrey is a popular garden plant, especially varieties with blue, purple or pure white flowers, though it can become invasive.

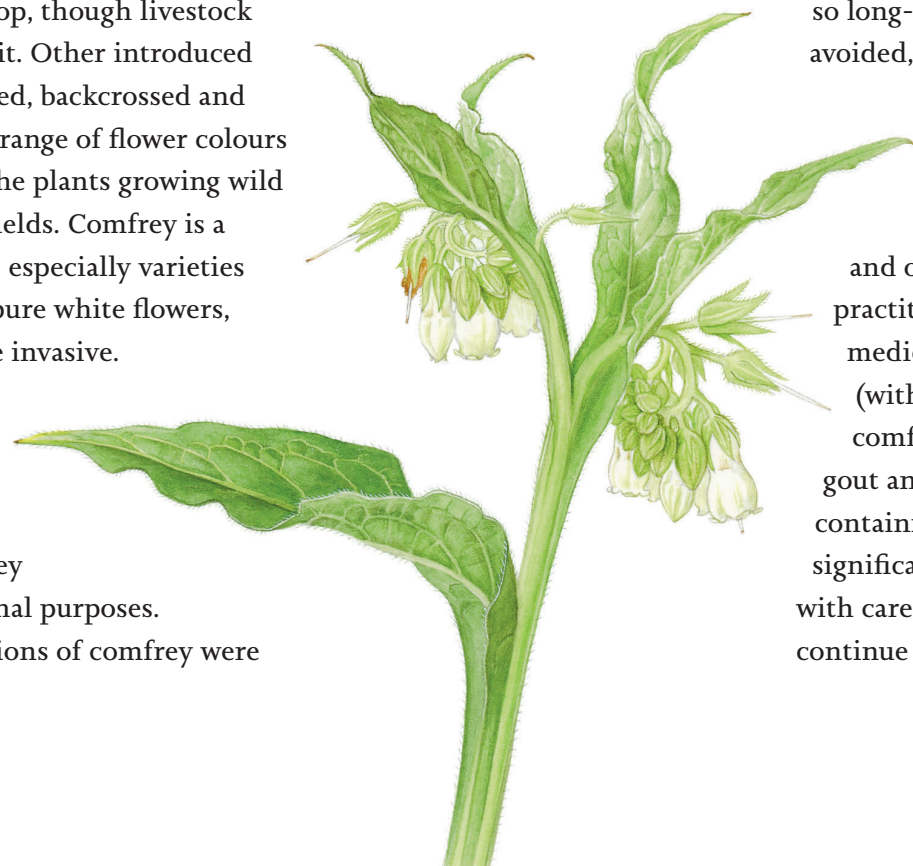
Gardeners sometimes dig it in as a green manure.

All types of comfrey were used for medicinal purposes. Infusions and decoctions of comfrey were

prescribed for internal ulcers and ruptures. Gerard recommended drinking comfrey root in ale for backache 'gotten by any violent motion, as wrestling, or overmuch use of women'. Though he also noted that the treatment could cause involuntary ejaculation. Studies have shown that taking comfrey internally can indeed affect the sex hormones. Historically, comfrey was eaten as a vegetable or in salad. I have been given comfrey soup in France and, thankfully, didn't notice any unexpected effects. In the middle of the last century, young leaves fried in batter were a popular spring delicacy in Bavaria. However, modern research has discovered that comfrey contains alkaloids which, in large doses, can cause liver damage, so it should not be taken internally. The alkaloids can be absorbed through the skin, so long-term external use or use on broken skin should be avoided, unless you are using alkaloid-free preparations.

Comfrey's safety during pregnancy and lactation, or for use on children, has not been established, so it should not be used.

However, today, prepared as creams and ointments, and used as prescribed by a health practitioner, comfrey can bring benefits. In rigorous medical tests, creams made with extracts of the root (with the dangerous alkaloid removed) confirmed comfrey's power to ease painful joints in arthritis, gout and sprains. Another study showed that a product containing an extract of Russian comfrey leaves significantly improved wound healing. So, used externally with care, and under medical supervision, comfrey can continue its healing tradition.





# Early summer

*Gather ye rosebuds while ye may*

ROBERT HERRICK (1591–1674),  
'To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time'





# High summer

*Now the fields are laughing*

ANON.,  
manuscript of Benediktbeuern  
(thirteenth century)

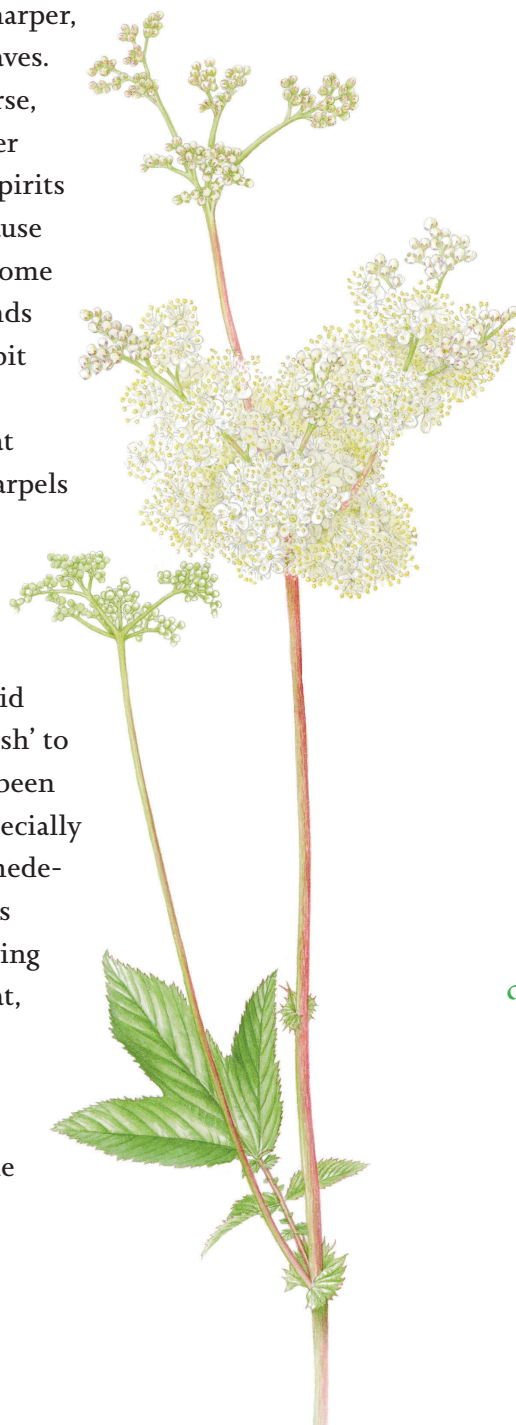


name, 'courtship-and-matrimony', contrasting the sweetness of the flowers with the sharper, more antiseptic scent of the crushed leaves.

It was an ideal strewing herb, of course, said to be Elizabeth I's favourite. A writer of the time remarked that it lifted the spirits and delighted the senses, but did not cause headaches or put you off your food, as some strong scents could do. The smell reminds me of marzipan, but en masse can be a bit overwhelming. If you have a hand lens or magnifying glass, it's worth looking at the fruits of meadowsweet, the naked carpels 'crookedly turning or winding one with another, made into a fine little head', as Gerard wrote. I agree, they are delightful to see.

In the seventeenth century, it was said that a meadowsweet leaf 'gave a fine relish' to a glass of claret, while the flowers have been used for centuries to flavour drinks, especially mead. The plant was originally called 'medewort' or 'mede-sweet', possibly from this custom; but by 1530 the name was evolving into 'meadowsweet', reflecting its habitat, too.

An infusion of flowers promoted sweating, helpful in agues (fevers), especially malaria – which in the Middle Ages was endemic in Europe, including



Britain. In more recent times, folk healers gave women meadowsweet tea to treat anaemia. An infusion of the leaves is said to relieve headaches, and I gather some stems when the plant is in flower, to dry the leaves for winter use. Meadowsweet has been valued in medicine for a very long time. The Anglo-Saxons are known to have prescribed it, and there are records of people still collecting it in the early part of the twentieth century. A Board of Agriculture leaflet published during the First World War listed it as wanted by herbalists and pharmacists.

Meadowsweet is one source of salicylates, which are oxidised into salicylic acid in the digestive tract. First isolated by an Italian scientist in 1838, salicylic acid can be converted into acetylsalicylic acid – aspirin – and by 1899 the pharmaceutical company Bayer had begun production of this new and incredibly useful drug. The name 'aspirin' comes from *Spiraea*, the old botanical name for meadowsweet. However, herbalists point to the dangers of isolating active principles from herbs: aspirin can cause gastric bleeding, while meadowsweet itself also contains mucilage and tannins which protect against such damage. In fact, one of meadowsweet's 'virtues' is as a remedy for acid stomach.

## Willow

Salicylates were also isolated from the bark of white willow (*Salix alba*), so called because its pubescent leaves shimmer like silver when the wind blows. Mankind has known and



Hops are common in the wild on moist soils, often as a relic of cultivation, and cultivars with golden leaves are popular with gardeners. Hops will grow quickly and can smother other plants, hence their species name *lupulus*. This means 'little wolf', from the old nickname 'willow-wolf', referring to hops' habit of climbing over willow trees.

## ☞ Mugwort and its relatives

By late summer, mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) is flourishing on roadsides, field margins and waste ground everywhere. It is tall and bushy, but so common we hardly notice it, considering it a weed. A friend's father, brought up on a Surrey farm in the 1920s, knew it as 'dungweed', because it always grew on the dung heap. Scholars debate about whether it was called 'mugwort' because it was used to flavour the beer in your mug, or from an old word for maggot, because it would keep the moth larvae out of your wardrobe. It was so easily available in the wild that it was rarely cultivated, except in a few physic gardens. Healers would collect the leaves in August, and dig the roots in autumn to dry.

Dioscorides called it 'artemisia' and prescribed it for gynaecological troubles. An infusion of the flowers taken as a drink, or a sitz bath with a decoction of leaves in it, would help to bring on periods, hasten expulsion of the afterbirth and heal inflammations of the womb, as well as break down kidney stones. A poultice of the leaves, mixed with myrrh and applied externally to the lower abdomen, would have similar effects. There are reports of Chinese and Siberian folk healers

