

HEDGEROW HERBALS

The quarterly newsletter from your local herbalist - Julie Dore
Articles, news, recipes and tips for a healthy you



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FREE

Welcome to the spring edition which includes information on Eczema and some spring plants with surprising healing properties

The Healing Powers of the Cowslip

Cowslip (*Primula veris*)



In times past the spring meadows and banks were filled with the gentle nodding heads of the cowslip and it is easy to understand how it got its Latin name, *Primula veris* meaning "first of spring". And it was not just its delicate beauty that was prized. Written records detailing the medicinal uses of

cowslips date from the 1st century. Like other medicinal plants, such as dandelions and nettles, the root and aerial parts of the cowslip contain different substances and were used for different medical conditions. Sadly, changes in agricultural practice, over-collecting and habitat destruction in the last 100 years have led to the demise of the cowslip in Britain limiting its availability for medicinal use here.

The roots contain saponins, soap-like substances that act as irritants on the mucus membranes. These cause the production of a watery excretion that liquifies catarrh helping the body to expel it. Therefore cowslip roots were widely used in treating chesty coughs and chronic bronchitis and still are today in some European countries where they still grow in abundance. The roots also contain salicylates, a group of substances related to aspirin, hence their documented use in treating inflammatory ailments such as muscular rheumatism, gout, spasms and

cramps (people with aspirin sensitivities or taking blood thinning medications should, therefore, not use cowslip root). Preparations of the root can also be used for headaches and migraines. The potency is highest in roots from mature plants harvested in the autumn. However collecting means destroying the plant, another reason UK herbalists no longer use cowslips, especially as there are other less endangered plants with either expectorant properties or anti-inflammatory actions.

The flower, or corolla, of the cowslip contains flavanoids and have a very sedating effect. It was the flowers that were used to make the famous cowslip wine. Small doses of the wine were used to treat insomnia and restlessness especially in children. It was a tonic used to calm nervous conditions, anxiety and to promote feelings of well being. An essential oil distilled from the flowers makes a very potent treatment for insomnia whereas an infused oil of the flowers applied externally treated neuralgia or bruises. A tea made from the flowers promotes sweating and was used to treat feverish colds or tension headaches. Ointment, made by pressing the flowers into pigs lard, was also recommended for the treatment of spots, blemishes and sunburn while an ointment made from the leaves was used for wound healing (go to www.hedgerow-herbals.co.uk for more up-to-date methods of making oils, ointments and creams!).

Primroses (*Primula vulgaris*) are a good second best for cowslips in home remedies but you should only use those you have cultivated yourself. **Never take these or cowslips from the wild.** Today, with more sympathetic farming methods and the seeding of verges and roadside banks with wild flower seeds, cowslips are becoming a much more common sight in springtime Britain. Cultivation by herb growers means we may once again be able to use this plant medicinally while still enjoying its beauty in the wild.

Daffodils and Dementia



As I child I was always warned about the dangers of eating daffodil bulbs. Apparently some careless folk had eaten them by mistake thinking they were onions! I always thought this very odd and I could not imagine anyone mistaking anything for a pungent onion. But the purveyors of doom were correct that the daffodil bulb does contain toxic alkaloids that in mammals act as an emetic and in high quantities causing collapse and death by paralysis of the central nervous system.

The roots, flowers and stems are less toxic and were used medicinally. Culpepper suggests boiling the roots and taking the liquid as a remedy against ague (fever with chills), a common complaint in the spring. The powdered flowers, infused in syrup were used to treat pulmonary catarrh as the milder emetic acts as an expectorant. Roots were also used to treat abscesses and skin eruptions and, mixed with honey, frankincense and myrrh, dropped into the ear to treat infections. Ointments made from the roots have been applied to sprains and aching joints since Roman times.

Now the symbol of Wales is being grown high in the Black Mountains. Growing at altitude stresses the plants and they produce more alkaloids, one of which the growers particularly hope to produce, being galanthamine. Present in the bulbs of all members of the snowdrop family (which includes the daffodil) this substance has been found beneficial in treating vascular dementia which is the second biggest cause of Alzheimer's disease. Patients with the early stages of this dreadful condition have shown improvements in memory, orientation and language skills. It is believed that the galantamine works by preventing the breakdown of brain chemicals that are crucial to memory loss and learning. It also stimulates proteins in the brain to make more of the chemical. The project is on-going and if they can succeed in producing a cheap source of a medicine to relieve this terrible illness it will be wonderful news.

But in the meantime NO eating daffodil bulbs!

ECZEMA

Itching is a form of pain as those inflicted with eczema can testify. The itch and the appearance combine to

make eczema an extremely unpleasant, distressing and life-limiting condition. Eczema is an inflammation of the skin; dermatitis is similar but is more often used to describe non-inherited skin problems e.g. contact dermatitis when wearing nickel. Eczema cannot be cured, only managed, and is often inherited from parents who suffer hay fever, asthma or eczema, the so called allergic triad. Children with atopic, or inherited eczema, often grow out of it by their teens, although this is no comfort to parents with a sleep deprived, itchy toddler. Some types only occur in adults, e.g. varicose eczema. In addition to the skin symptoms of itching, dryness, scaling or small blisters you may suffer thirst and over sensitivity to heat or cold.

Even inheriting "eczema" genes does not mean someone will be affected; a trigger or allergen is usually needed. Keeping a food and lifestyle diary is useful to pinpoint the triggers and identify steps to avoid them. In babies, there is often an intolerance to wheat or cow's milk products (NB: these allergens can manifest in breast milk if they feature in the mother's diet). The best method to test for possible food triggers is to eliminate suspect foods for at least two weeks - use goat or sheep milk products including formula milk (but not soya, another common allergen) and oats or rice instead of wheat.

Common triggers include:

- ◆ Pollen
- ◆ Dust mites
- ◆ Pets
- ◆ Medication
- ◆ Central heating
- ◆ Change of climate
- ◆ Certain foods (see below)
- ◆ Tiredness, stress or illness
- ◆ Pregnancy and the menopause



If the eczema is chronic, you need to look at making changes to your diet and lifestyle and ensuring you maintain a healthy immune system.

Once eczema has manifested many factors can make it worse and therefore you should take steps to limit exposure. Factors include:

- ◆ **Cigarette smoke** – avoid or minimise exposure and give up if you smoke!
- ◆ **Alcohol** – reduce intake
- ◆ **Exhaust fumes** - keep car windows shut, on foot use quieter routes and don't jog along roads
- ◆ **Stress or emotional trauma**- use herbs to help alleviate, relaxation techniques, stress management
- ◆ **Infections** – boost immune with healthy diet, herbs
- ◆ **Over exertion** – avoid
- ◆ **Overheating** – wear loose cotton clothing,
- ◆ **Over bathing** – use warm water not hot, showers instead of baths and only use latter for maximum of 10mins, avoid exfoliating

products, dry gently, don't rub and moisturise skin thoroughly afterwards

- ◆ **Swimming pools** – protect sensitive areas with petroleum jelly
- ◆ **Dust or sand**- wear gloves & protective clothing
- ◆ **Certain textiles** e.g. wool – cotton and cotton mixes products are better
- ◆ **Household chemicals** – wear cotton lined waterproof gloves for washing up and wet cleaning, cotton gloves when dusting & vacuuming, (or get someone else to do it!) don't use biological washing powder
- ◆ **Cosmetics, soaps, shampoos** - use hypoallergenic versions for dry sensitive skin, e.g. aqueous cream; products containing lanolin can cause reactions in some people. Avoid hair dyes.

Herbal Help for eczema



Chickweed (*Stellaria media*)

The skin is linked to every activity of every other organ and system in the body and can reflect underlying problems in any of these areas which herbal medicine will try to resolve. The skin is your largest organ and one function is to assist in ridding the body of toxins (or allergens). Eczema can represent an overload of toxins in the skin as other organs of elimination, the liver and kidneys, are not performing as efficiently as they should.

Conventional treatment consists of steroid creams which treat the symptoms but can permanently thin the skin. Herbally, we also treat the symptoms as these are so unpleasant. Chickweed based cream with nourishing borage oil can stop the itch without the side effects. Muslin soaked in a cold infusion of either chamomile or marigold is also very healing and soothing. However herbs taken internally to boost detoxification and the immune system or to suppress reactions to allergens and combat stress help stop the condition manifesting itself. In adults things like stress and tiredness would also be addressed herbally if they were a contributing factor.



Herbs used include Burdock and Viola (pictured above) to move toxins away from the skin. Cleavers, milk thistle & dandelion (below) aid their elimination.



FOOD INTOLERANCES and Dietary advice

If your eczema is triggered by a food intolerance, it will flare up 6-24 hours after eating the food. Commonly other symptoms will be present; these could include headaches, fatigue, fluid retention, irritability, depression, joint or muscle pains, flushes, sweats, diarrhoea or constipation, wind and indigestion. The symptoms will continue for several days after eating the food. Bizarrely people may crave the food they are intolerant to so if you do have cravings for a food stop eating it for two weeks to see if symptoms improve. Then re-introduce the food and see what effect it has.

Seven foods account for 90% of intolerances; they are peanuts, any type of tree nut, soya, wheat, cow's milk, hens' eggs and shellfish. Other foods which can cause intolerances include citrus fruit, bananas, alcohol, chocolate, tea, coffee, poultry, food additives, beef and white fish.

Following a healthy diet is one way to manage eczema. It will improve the immune system and rid the body of toxins. Choose unrefined carbohydrates i.e. whole grain products. Sugar has also been found to aggravate eczema in some individuals. Protein is necessary to repair and maintain tissue and strengthen the immune system. Support the digestion with papaya and pineapple as they enhance protein digestion. Eat foods such as artichoke, endive, beetroot, dandelion root and wheatgrass which boost liver function helping detoxify the body. Deficiencies of zinc, B vitamins, calcium and magnesium can be contributory factors. A disturbance of the metabolism of essential fatty acids, caused by a deficiency of unrefined oils and an excess of refined oils, saturated fats, sugar and additives in the diet is another factor in the condition.

The following vitamins and minerals are also important; eat foods from each list, as this will be much healthier than taking a supplement.

Vitamin A – for repair of skin, to counter infections, ease allergic symptoms and encourage moisture retention

Good sources include dairy products, orange and yellow fruit and vegetables and dark leafy greens

Vitamin C – natural anti-histamine reducing allergic reactions plus it helps combat infections

Good sources include citrus fruits, kiwi, leafy greens, tomatoes, berries, cherries and peppers

Vitamin E - a powerful antioxidant, it will protect against free radical damage and cell damage
Good sources include vegetable and nut oils, cod liver oil, green leafy vegetables, nuts, pulses and whole-wheat products

Vitamin B complex – especially good if stress is a factor also helps to combat dryness and itching
Good sources include yeast & yeast extract, eggs, offal, legumes, poultry, fish, sprouting shoots, nuts & seeds

ZINC – vital for healing and skin health, often found to be deficient in eczema sufferers
Good sources include sea food, lean red meat, dark turkey meat, grains, lentils, milk, yoghurt & baked potato

Essential Fatty Acids (Omega 3 & 6) – reduce and control inflammation and needed for healthy immune function. **Good sources include** nuts & seeds, vegetable oils, oily fish, green leaf vegetables, evening primrose and borage oil.



Borage (*Borago officinalis*)

REDUCE caffeine as it makes the gut more permeable therefore allergens are more likely to be absorbed so triggering an attack.

REDUCE animal fats as these contain substances that increase inflammatory factors in the body

AVOID foods containing histamine as this chemical heightens allergic reactions. It is found in ripened cheeses, smoked or cured sausages and red wine

AVOID food colouring and additives or reduce by eating less processed food

Aspirin containing medications can trigger attacks

DRINK PLENTY OF WATER to cleanse the system and hydrate the skin

Other Ways to Ward off Eczema

- ◆ Go on holiday- UV light and sea water are beneficial, and so is relaxing
- ◆ Exercise (but avoid over exertion and over heating) to improve circulation which will aid skin cleansing, a brisk walk for example
- ◆ Treat any broken skin with care to avoid infection, wash hands before applying cream, ensure clean towels etc and use own soaps to reduce contamination
- ◆ Keep the air moist, especially in centrally heated areas. Either use a humidifier or place bowls of water near radiators
- ◆ Instead of soap, put 4 heaped dessert spoons of either oats or wheatgerm in a 30 cm square of muslin tying the ends to form a bag. It contains vitamin E, oils and healing demulcents that soothe inflamed areas and stimulate the growth of new skin. You can use 3-4 times before replacing.

DIARY DATES

- **Saturday 25th April** (10am-3pm) Lambs and Cowslips day at Bird Farm Barton –visit the home of the Countryside Restoration Trust and go on a medicinal walk
- **Monday 4th May** Royston May Fayre, have a blood pressure check and introductory consultation

THIS NEWSETTER IS PUBLISHED 3 TIMES A YEAR SO LOOK OUT FOR THE NEXT EDITION OF HEDGEROW-HERBAL NEWS WHICH WILL BE AVAILABLE FROM July 2009

Visit the Hedgerow Herbals website www.hedgerow-herbals.co.uk.

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