

Wild Lettuce

Latin Name: *Lactuca virosa*

Also known as: Prickly Lettuce, Horse Thistle, Green Endive, Compass Plant, Poor Man's Opium, Opium Lettuce

Scientific Classification

Wild varieties of lettuce have some percentage of narcotic sap (induces sleep or stupor and relieves pain without the addictive qualities of opiates) and among them *Lactuca virosa* has the greatest concentration of narcotic juice. Other medicinal varieties of lettuce include *L. scariola* (also commonly known as prickly lettuce) *L. altissima*, *L. Canadensis* (also called wild lettuce and commonly found in America) and *L. sativa* (known as garden lettuce). Cultivation of garden lettuce has significantly reduced the narcotic sap content, but the herb is still used as an ingredient for lotions to heal skin disorders caused by sunburn and coarseness.

Family: Asteraceae – aster, daisy and sunflower family
Compositae – in earlier classifications
Genus: Lactuca – lettuce
Species: *L. virosa* – bitter lettuce

Influence on the Body	(PRINCIPLE ACTIONS are listed in CAPITAL LETTERS)
<i>Blood & Circulation</i>	heart palpitations
<i>Body System</i>	LOOSENS CATARRH (inflamed and congested mucous membranes) • HARDENED MUCUS
<i>Digestive Tract</i>	bitter (stimulates digestive juices and improves appetite) • dyspepsia (indigestion) • colic (severe abdominal pain) • irritated gastro-intestinal tract • diarrhea • intestinal worms
<i>Eyes</i>	eyesight
<i>Infections and Immune System</i>	ERRATIC FEVER • diaphoretic (promotes perspiration) • <i>Candida albicans</i> (yeast infection) • whooping cough (also known as pertussis, a contagious disease characterized by severe coughing and 'whooping' sound upon inhalation)
<i>Inflammation</i>	arthritic joints
<i>Lungs and Respiratory System</i>	asthma • BRONCHITIS • CONGESTIVE COUGHS • LOOSENS PHLEGM • EXPECTORANT (loosens and removes phlegm from the respiratory tract) • TUBERCULOSIS

<i>Nervous System</i>	NERVINE (strengthens nervous system function) • anxiety • mild sedative • insomnia • restlessness • hypnotic (induces sleep) • narcotic (induces sleep or stupor and relieves pain without the addictive qualities of opiates) • relieves pain • anodyne (relieves pain and reduces nerve excitability) • spasms • antispasmodic (relieves cramping, spasms, and convulsions)
<i>Skin, Tissues & Hair</i>	chapped skin
<i>Urinary Tract</i>	diuretic (increases urine flow) • urinary tract infections

Key Properties:

- NERVINE – *strengthens nerve function, quiets nerve excitability, eases pain, induces sleep*

Primarily affecting: NERVES

History	<p>The ancients held lettuce in high esteem for its cooling and refreshing properties. Legend claims that the Roman emperor Augustus built a statue of the physician who had prescribed lettuce for him, as he believed that the plant had cured him of a serious illness. No doubt it was prickly lettuce.</p> <p>The Roman naturalist Gaius Plinius Secundus (23-79 AD), better known as Pliny the Elder, wrote extensively of <i>Lactuca</i> in his work <i>Naturalis Historia</i>:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“This lettuce has the property of stanching blood, and of healing phagedænic [skin ulcer] sores and putrid spreading ulcers, as well as tumours before suppuration. Both the root as well as the leaves are good, too, for erysipelas [type of skin infection]; and a decoction of it is drunk for affections of the spleen.”</p> <p>The plant’s genus name, <i>Lactuca</i>, is derived from the classical Latin name for the milky juice, and ‘virosa,’ means poisonous. It is called ‘compass plant’ because its leaves turn toward the sun during the day. Wild Lettuce has been called ‘poor man’s opium’ and was considered an opium substitute by 19th century physicians. They recommended wild lettuce preparations for nervous disorders, irritable coughs (even in children), and for its calming, sedative properties.</p>
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	<p>Wild Lettuce had a surge of popularity as a recreational drug in the 1970s, but was abandoned for stronger psychotropic drugs.</p>
Attributes	<p><u>Key Components:</u> (including, but not limited to)</p> <p><u>Bitter</u> • <u>Lactucarium</u> including: <u>Lactucopicrin</u> and <u>Lactucin</u></p> <p>A thick, milky sap called lactucarium results from breaking or cutting the stem or leaf of wild lettuce. Young plants have relatively low amounts of lactucarium. Concentration in the plant peaks when it begins to flower.</p> <p>Wild Lettuce was studied extensively by the Council of the Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain in 1911. They discovered two chemicals, lactucopicrin and lactucin, largely responsible for the herbal qualities of <i>L. virosa</i>.</p>
<i>Nervous System</i>	<p>Preparations made with dried lactucarium of the wild lettuce plant are often used to induce sleep and treat severe nervous disorders. It is known to calm restlessness, anxiety and cramps. The leaves contain sedative and pain relieving properties that act like morphine, though milder. As a tranquilizer, wild lettuce preparations may be given to adults and children alike to ensure sound sleep at night.</p> <p>Sometimes wild lettuce is called 'little opium' due to its use as a sedative and hypnotic. Once dried, the sap is often referred to as 'lettuce opium', though it contains no opiates. Wild Lettuce is milder than opium and does not have the addictive qualities or digestive problems that are associated with opium. The effects of wild lettuce are felt quickly, but do not last very long (30 minutes to a couple of hours).</p>
<i>Anodyne</i>	<p>Wild Lettuce is known to relieve pain. It has been used for arthritic joints and soothing inflamed, chapped skin.</p>
<i>Coughs</i>	<p>Wild Lettuce is frequently used in the form of a syrup to quiet irritable coughs. It has been used effectively for whooping cough and brings relief to those suffering from bronchitis.</p>
<i>Urinary Tract</i>	<p>Wild Lettuce is a diuretic that increases urine flow, soothes sore, inflamed mucous membranes, and helps to heal urinary tract infections.</p>
<i>Infections</i>	<p>Wild Lettuce extract has shown activity against <i>Candida albicans</i>. It is also a mild diaphoretic, promoting perspiration and cooling the body.</p>

<i>Digestion</i>	As a bitter, wild lettuce induces gastric secretions, aids digestion, and eases colic and spasms of the digestive tract.
Herb Parts Used	Milky sap and leaves (the whole plant contains the milky latex sap)
Preparations and Remedies	The milky sap is not easily powdered and is only slightly soluble in boiling water (though it softens). Leaves may be purchased in bulk, in the cut or powdered form.
<i>Infusions</i>	To prepare an infusion with wild lettuce, add 1-2 teaspoons of the herb's leaves to a cup of boiling water and steep for 10-15 minutes. Drink 1 cup, 3 times a day. A tincture or tea consisting of equal parts wild lettuce and valerian, may be taken internally or massage on sore areas for minor pain relief. It is a natural sedative and soothes nerves.
<i>Poultices</i>	Wild Lettuce is used in poultice applications for its soothing and pain relieving qualities.
Safety	No health hazards or adverse side effects are known. To sensitive individuals the sap of the plant may be irritating to the touch.
Plant Profile	<i>Natural Habitat:</i> Indigenous to Western and Southern Europe and cultivated in Germany, Austria, France, Scotland, North America and elsewhere. Wild Lettuce grows on banks and waste places in dry, sandy, rocky soils.
<i>Description</i>	Wild Lettuce is a large, stout plant with abundant milky sap. It is a biennial herb (has a two year growth cycle) reaching a maximum height of six feet. The erect stem springs from a brown tap-root. The stem is smooth, pale green, and sometimes spotted with purple. There are a few prickles on the lower part of the stem and the short horizontal branches above. The plant has numerous, large, oblong, leaves (from 6-18 inches long) growing at the base, and fewer, smaller, sharply toothed, leaves along the stem. Veins that contain the milky juice of the leaves are connected in a web-like formation. Pale yellow flower heads are numerous and grow on elongated branches in August through October. The rough, black fruit is oval, with a broad wing along the

edge, and prolonged above it grows a white propeller-like shoot with silvery tufts of hair.

The whole plant is rich in a milky juice that flows freely from any wound. When dry, the juice hardens and turns brown. The sap has a narcotic odor that resembles opium and a bitter flavor (although horses love the taste).

*Harvesting
Wild Lettuce*

The herb is harvested in summer when the plant is in blossom.

Collectors cut the heads of the plants and scrape the juice into china vessels several times daily until it is exhausted. The sap is then warmed a little and tapped to release it from the container. The resulting lacticarium is cut into small parts and dehydrated for future use.

Commercially, the medicinal qualities from the sap can be extracted many ways, but the most common is by soaking the gathered plant material in alcohol. After several weeks, the plant material is filtered out, leaving an infused liquid extract.
