

Grandma Called it Medicine Leaf



Quick Guide to Using Common Plantain and Narrowleaf (Ribwort) Plantain

Plantago major and Plantago lanceolata

Common plantain (pictured above) was the first wild plant that I learned to use for medicine, so I wanted to make sure you had a chance to get to know this helpful plant, too. Both common plantain (also known as greater plantain) and narrowleaf plantain (also known as ribwort plantain) can be used interchangeably, so from here on out I'll just use the term "plantain".

I was first introduced to plantain by my grandmother, who pointed it out in her yard and told me that the Indians (Native Americans) called it “medicine leaf”. Unfortunately, grandma wasn’t an herbalist, so I ended up waiting many more years to truly discover this wonderful plant.

Fast forward a few decades to our current homestead, and a friendship with a homeschooling grandmother who had a passion for plants and herbalism. Her own family hadn’t yet caught the “plant bug” (they were more animal people), so she and I had some wonderful times together gathering plants and talking about the medicines you could make out of common weeds. She showed me how to apply plantain to mosquito bites and make up simple plantain oil.

Now I purposely spread plantain seeds in parts of the garden, and watch for lush stands at the neighbor’s farms so I can stock up. We always keep some plantain salve, oil and dried leaves on hand through winter when the fresh plants aren’t available.



So what is plantain?

Plantain is a perennial plant that can be found in most temperate (mid-range temperature) areas around the world (no Polar Regions or jungles). Although grandma pointed out that it was used by Native Americans, many native people referred to it as “White Man’s Foot”, as it is often spread by European settlers because of its many uses.

The plant grows in a rosette form, with thin, tall flower stalks that are wind pollinated. The flowers aren’t very showy. Usually you simply see green raised bumps at the end of the stalk. If you catch them at the right time, you may see small white blossoms. The leaves have pronounced strings, like celery stalks. They are flat and oblong in shape. Greater plantain leaves are wider, while narrowleaf are more narrow and lance-shaped.



This common weed is not related to the banana shaped plantains sold in grocery stores. *Image at left is narrowleaf or ribwort plantain.*

Where can you find plantain?

Plantain grows where people go – on sidewalks, roadsides, meadows and lawns. It particularly likes compacted soils. The area with the most plantain in grandma's yard sometimes was driven over. I've found bumper stands of plantain in the neighbor's yards where there is vehicle traffic on the lawn. Another friend has a great patch in an area of her lawn that often gets waterlogged and compacted in wet years. I used to get a lot more plantain in my garden, but as the soil has improved, there are fewer volunteers. You'll often find plantain popping

up in a sidewalk crack or roadside edge. It's a tough plant.

How do you use plantain?

Fresh leaves

The simplest and easiest way to use plantain is to crush or chew the fresh leaves and apply them to an insect bite or sting. Hold in place with your fingers, or bind with a band-aid or other wrap if needed. Typically there will be some improvement within a matter of minutes.

The fresh leaves are amazing for relieving the itching, swelling and burning associated with insect bites and stings. We've used them for mosquito and spider bites and stings from wasps and yellowjackets. Fresh mosquito bites tend to respond the quickest, stings and spider bites may need longer application.



The fresh leaf can also be used to treat the burn from stinging nettle. Apply the freshly crushed leaf to the area affected by the nettle as soon as possible to counteract the sting.

Fresh plantain poultices or juice may also be helpful for other conditions with swelling and irritation, such as varicose veins, scraped knees or irritated gums. For skin, use the crushed leaf or juice to cover the area and wrap. Change daily or as needed. For gums, pack a wad of plantain leaf against the affected area to reduce swelling until you can get to a dentist.

Fresh leaves can be frozen for winter use. For ease of use, freeze individual leaves on a cookie sheet or tray and then pack them into a freezer container after they are frozen. Thaw individually, as needed.



Dried Leaves

You can dry leaves in a commercial dehydrator, or spread them on a drying rack in a warm location out of direct sunlight. When using a dehydrator, keep the temperature at 95 F (35 C) or below to protect the quality of the herb. If you wash the leaves before dehydrating, make sure to pat them as dry as possible before starting dehydration. Damp leaves may mold instead of drying, especially if you are attempting to air dry. Toss any leaves that turn black.

Dry leaves until they are crisp. Stems will take longer to dry, so if you're in a hurry to store, you could break the dry leaf off the stem.

Make plantain tea by using a teaspoon of crushed dry leaf or minced fresh leaf per cup of water. Place leaves in cup; pour in boiling water; steep, covered, for 10 minutes. Strain and enjoy. The flavor is mildly green and “planty”, not bitter.

Take three cups of tea per day to help with conditions such as coughs, irritable bowel, hemorrhoids and seasonal allergies.

Plantain Infused Oils and Salves

You can view step by step instructions for infusing plantain leaves in oil in the post on the website, [Grandma Called it Medicine Leaf](#).

The post [How to Make a Salve with Infused Oils](#) shows how to make a simple salve thickened with beeswax.

Plantain oil is helpful for treating larger skin areas, like sunburn or when you've been chewed to pieces by mosquitoes. Plantain salve is handy for spot treatment, like a single bite or sting, chapped heels or rough hands.

Plantain Seeds

Plantain seeds are harvested when they are brown and ripe. Snip the seed heads and allow them to air dry completely. *See plantain seed stalks in snow at right.*

For storage, strip the seeds and seed husks off the stems. Store in a glass jar in a cool, dry location, out of direct sunlight.

The psyllium in plantain seed husks is similar to the psyllium in some commercial bulk fiber blends. When water is added, the psyllium swells and becomes slippery. This can help bulk up your poop and get things moving in the digestive system.



To use, grind the seeds and husks in a coffee grinder and sprinkle a teaspoon of the ground mixture on food or mix it into liquid and drink. You could also eat the husks whole, but they are rather chewy.

There are many more ways to use plantain, including eating the young leaves in salad and cooking the older leaves, but I thought you might enjoy this introduction to this plant that's become an old friend to me.

If you enjoy plant lore, I encourage you to take a look at the [Weekly Weeder series](#), which I'll be updating over the course of 2017. (Feel free to leave a comment if there's a plant you'd like to learn more about that you don't see in the series.)

You can check out some of my favorite books and resources in in the [first post of the Weekly Weeder series](#). Some of this information in this article was adapted from the book *Backyard Medicine*, which is featured on the list.

For more detailed herbal studies, the Herbal Academy is a great resource. They have [The Herbarium](#), which includes access to all the Herbal Academy e-books and an online library features plant monographs, detailed articles and presentations and printable charts and graphs, all for less than \$4 per month.

They also have in depth herbal classes for every level of study from beginner to advanced, including an entrepreneur herbal course specifically designed for those who wish to sell herbs or herbal products. You can [view their full line of courses here](#). Should you choose to enroll in any of the Herbal Academy courses through my links; I earn a small commission at no extra cost to you.

As always, thanks for taking time out of your day to visit, and I hope you find this information useful.

Laurie Neverman

Common Sense Homesteading
<http://commonsensehome.com>

