



Yarrow

Achillea millefolium

Yarrow is a plant, which is more commonly considered to be a weed, and it can be a bit of a pest in the garden, until you realise that if you have high blood pressure for example, it could be a very effective medicine for you! It is also the International Herb of The Year for 2024

(Image: Yarrow flowers, Karina Hilterman)

Identification & Cultivation: Yarrow is in the Asteraceae (previously Compositae or Daisy) family, named, as the flower head is actually a composition of many small flowers; take a close look sometime. Yarrow is considered to be a weed by most; it can be quite a rampant perennial grower, its rhizomes forming mats of roots, sending tough, furrowed stems 10 – 60 cm high with very finely divided leaves up to 15 cm long. Yarrow flowers right throughout summer, flat-topped corymbs, usually white, although pink varieties can be found in the wild. There are several brightly coloured garden varieties available (they are less rampant). It is the white flowered one which has the greatest medicinal properties.



Companion Planting: Because of Yarrows growth habit, it is not such a good companion plant, except that it can create a 'good thick mat' around trees and shrubs, suppressing weed competition. This herb has a very long history as a medicinal herb. Some of the folk names for Yarrow are, milfoil, bad mans plaything, hundred leaved grass, carpenters weed, staunch grass and soldiers wound wort (wort being the old English word for herb)-the last three folk names reflecting one of its therapeutic actions.

Parts used: The aerial parts; stems, leaves and flowers, and its taste is that of an aromatic bitter.

Harvesting: From new growth in the spring right through to autumn, though, if you need Yarrow in an emergency, pick it anytime there is growth present!

Constituents: Yarrow is quite a complex cocktail of chemical constituents, including; flavonoids, (including rutin, quercetin, luteolin, apigenin) volatile oils, tannins, glycosides, sesquiterpenes, hydroxycoumarins, asparagine. It is high in vitamins A, C, E, and K. Minerals Manganese, potassium, iodine, copper, and iron.



Therapeutic Actions: Astringent; it tightens tissue, which will help stop bleeding (hence the name staunch blood); peripheral vasodilator – which means it helps to dilate blood vessels, especially in the hands and feet. Diaphoretic, (helps with fevers), a digestive stimulant (as are most foods with a bitter taste), anti-spasmodic – helps to relax tight or spasmed muscles. Yarrow also helps as a menstrual regulator. Yarrow is quite a complex cocktail of chemical constituents, also high in lots of Vitamins and Minerals, a very useful weed!

(Image: Yarrow;

<https://www.botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/y/yarrow02-l.jpg>)

Medicinal uses & Dosage: It can be prepared as an infusion by placing either 1-2 teaspoons of dried or fresh herb in a cup and pour over boiling water, cover with a saucer (to keep in the volatile oils), and leave 10 minutes to infuse. This can be hot 3 times a day, or if feverish, hourly.

As a tincture (an extraction with alcohol), taken 2-4mls up to 3 times daily.

Yarrow assists the body to cope with fevers, and helps to lower elevated blood pressure by dilating and toning blood vessels. It is also a digestive stimulant – so helps sluggish digestion, and is a urinary antiseptic, so is most useful for any urinary infections, such as cystitis.

Externally: Yarrow can be used for wound healing, or as a wash; if you cut yourself and are bleeding, grab a handful of yarrow leaves, rub them to release their juice and pack onto the cut and it will help

staunch the bleeding. A bruised leaf of Yarrow put up a bleeding nostril will also help staunch the blood flow. Make a strong infusion as a wash or as a compress for bruises, sprains or haemorrhoids and varicose veins.



(Image: Yarrow flowers, Cashmere, Melissa Hutchison)

Culinary uses: This is not generally considered to be a culinary herb, it was though used in years gone by as a salad herb, I imagine the young leaves would add a refreshing bitter taste and in turn be of value medicinally, even in small doses. The bitter taste would stimulate the liver and gall bladder, so serve it with rich foods, to aid digestion perhaps...

Fält Hop is Swedish for field hop and the Swedes used this herb in beer making, the Swedish polymath Linnaeus suggested that beer brewed with Yarrow was “*more intoxicating than when hops were used in the brew*”. Beer brewed with Yarrow was known to be made in some African countries. Robin Harford (Eatweeds) says: “Its peppery foliage and bitter leaves and flowers bring an aromatic flavour to salads. The leaves can be used in almost any dish as a vegetable, added to soups and sauces, or simply boiled and simmered in butter as a side dish.”

Other Uses: As a dye plant, Yarrow is a very useful; when used in ‘eco-printing’ it prints a golden yellow. As a fabric dye, it produces a range of yellows; when iron is added, as a mordant, to the flowering tops, olive-green shades are developed. Yarrow is one of the herbs in making Bio-Dynamic preparations and is known as a ‘compost activator’ or accelerator. Perhaps the best way of using it for this purpose is to chop it up, pour boiling water over it and stir well (Yarrow tea). When it has cooled, pour it over your plant material to be composted, or you can add to a compost heap that is slow. Otherwise, chop fresh or dried Yarrow into your compost; perhaps it is best not to add the roots as they may grow. Yarrow tea can also be directly watered over soil that requires its fertility stimulating. Historically, it was sometimes used as an ingredient of snuff.

History & Mystery: Interestingly, Yarrow is considered to be a feminine herb, Ruled by the planet Venus and the water element.

Yarrow’s botanical name, Achillea, is in honour of the hero from Greek mythology Achilles. It is written that he used this herb to treat the wounds of his warriors after the Trojan War, this led to it be called *militaris* or military herb. Achilles (a seventh child), knew of the value of this great herb as it was used on by the centaur named Chiron, who was a physician, used it for burns on his body. Legend said that the seventh child was unlucky, so his mother attempted to kill him, by setting him on fire! Thank goodness for capable centaurs and Achillea!

Its history of mystical use is ancient, just as its healing uses are. Traditionally it was considered to have great powers, to encourage love, courage and psychic powers, and used in spells for these, also used in wedding floral decorations to assist enduring love.

The ancient Chinese divination ritual I Ching, traditionally used Yarrow stalks for casting.

The Roman soldiers, who called it soldier’s woundwort, always made sure it grew along the way to their regular battle areas, as it can help stop bleeding.

So there you go – may be you will look at Yarrow in a new light now, and keep it in mind for any of the above misfortunes!

“An ounce of Yarrow sewed up in flannel and placed under the pillow before going to bed having repeated the following words, brought a vision of the future husband or wife:

‘Thou pretty herb of Venus’ tree,

Thy true name it is Yarrow;

Now who my bosom friend must be,

Pray tell thou me to-morrow.” - Halliwell’s Popular Rhymes

References: *Materia Medica For The Southern Hemisphere*, Gilian Painter & Carole Fisher; *Eatweeds*.

Prepared for the Herb Federation of New Zealand’s Herb Awareness Month 2024. Enquiries: www.herbs.org.nz

Advisory Note: This text is given as a general guidance. If any adverse reactions occur or symptoms persist, please contact a qualified medical herbalist or medical doctor immediately.