Burdock

Arctium lappa

““Skin diseases are conditions in which Burdock has gained a reputation ” King’s Dispensatory, 1898

Identification & Cultivation: Burdock is in the Asteraceae family. Originally from Europe, it is now found growing around the globe typically in disturbed soils, along roadsides, and in paddocks. It is classified as a noxious weed as its prickly heads are notorious for catching on clothing and ruining sheep fleeces.

It is a biennial and so completes in life cycle in two years, dying down in winter as part of this cycle. In the first year Burdock forms a large low lying basal rosette. The large coarse leaves are ovate or triangular in shape, green with sparse hairs on top and whitish with dense hairs underneath. They can be up to 2 feet wide and 1.5 feet across. In the second year the plant produces a sturdy stalk up to 9 feet tall. The prickly composite flower heads are composed of reddish-purple florets surrounded by bracts with inward-turning tiny hooks. The round seed heads are light brown in colour and bristly. Much of the medicine is contained within the large fleshy root which can reach 4 feet in friable soils. The roots help break up compacted land and transfer deeply held minerals to the leaves. It is a drought tender and frost-resistant species that grows well in sun or partial shade.

Parts used: Roots, seeds, leaves and stalks. The roots are harvested in the autumn of the first year and in spring of the second year prior to the production of flower stems. Leaves are harvested in the first year or prior to flowering. Burdock reproduces by seed and one plant can produce approximately 1500! The seeds are collected after the burrs have dried and turned brown.

Character: Burdock is characterised as bitter, and sweet (particularly the mucilaginous root). Energetically cooling with the capacity to dry or moisten.

Constituents: This species has a rich constituent profile in large part due to its deep root action. The root contains up to 45% inulin (a prebiotic), plus chlorogenic acid, mucilage, sulfurous acetylene compounds, polyacetylenes and bitter guaianolide-type constituents
Nutritional constituents of note include vitamins A, B1 and B2, C, E and P along with the minerals iron, copper, calcium, iodine, silicon, sulphur and zinc.

Therapeutic Actions: Perhaps most highly regarded for its alterative and depurative actions to open up and improve the elimination channels of the lymphatics, kidneys (it’s a diuretic), liver (its a hepatic and so strengthens, tones and stimulates bile secretions) and skin zone. It is also an anti-microbial, anti-oxidant, anti-inflammatory and nutritive. The seeds also have a diaphoretic and hypoglycaemic action.

Medicinal uses: a perfect motto for Burdock could well be ‘slow and steady’. This herb is typically used at a low-moderate dose over a long period of time to support chronic skin conditions including eczema, psoriasis, acne and boils.
Inflammatory joint conditions such as arthritis are another common use of this herb. One study of a group of people with osteoarthritis, reported significant lowered levels of C-reactive protein, an inflammatory marker, after 42 days of drinking Burdock tea.[1]

The fresh root is a significant source of inulin, a prebiotic fibre that serves as food for beneficial bacteria in the gut microbiome. Whenever the microbiome is supported, the therapeutic benefits are wide reaching including to the immune and nervous systems.
Burdock was included in two famous cancer-supportive remedies in the 1920's, the Essaic and Huxley formulae. Burdock is still used today to support this chronic disease as science continues to identify anti-tumor activity within the plant, including through the constituents, arctiin and arctigenin. [2]
Research indicates the root has gastro-protective properties and so is considered for inflammatory conditions such as peptic ulcers and acid-reflux.[3] This action is attributed to the high mucilage and inulin content, plus various antioxidants.
The roots of Burdock are commonly eaten as a vegetable throughout Asia, Brazil and Portugal/Europe where it is respected for its diuretic effects, plus as a general support to the digestive system. It can be used topically to support skin conditions via a decoction of its root or leaf tea and applied as a compress, or as a leaf poultice.

Dosage:

Burdock is considered a safe herb, however due to a lack of research on its safety, burdock extracts are not recommended during pregnancy/ breastfeeding and for those on anti-platelet and anti-coagulant medications. The root can be dried or used fresh to include in the diet.
Three times daily:
Decoction of dried root: 2-6gm
Infusion of dried leaf – 2-6gm
Fluid extract (25%) – 2-8mls
Water based preparations such as infusions and decoctions are best when wanting the depurative and urinary supportive benefits.

Other Uses: It has been used by traditional healers in Brazil to treat AIDS. The large leaves of burdock were once used to wrap and store butter. Burdock is often paired with Dandelion (Taraxacum spp.) for a synergistic action.

History & Mystery:

It is mistakenly thought that the burrs of Burdock were the inspiration for Velcro, but this was actually the cocklebur plant (Xanthium spp.). Lose a button while out walking? Try Burdock's burrs as a makeshift version!

As part of learning to co-exist with this important medicinal species, when you have enough plants remember to remove the seed heads before they mature. The flowers are mainly pollinated by bumblebees and honeybees. Birds can get caught in the burrs when feeding on the seeds and insects within the seeds – another good reason to remove the seed head.

References:
1. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267515411_Effects_of_Arctium_lappa_L_Burdock_root_tea_on_inflammatory_status_and_oxidative_stress_in_patients_with_knee_osteoarthritis
2. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5880935/
3. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877860710600100

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