

The East London Garden Society

Plant Facts

Arnica



Arnica is one of the best-known homeopathic remedies. It has been used in several trials to demonstrate the effect of homeopathic remedies on bruising and trauma. Indeed, some plastic surgeons swear by it for reducing bruising after cosmetic surgery.

Many people are converted to the homeopathic cause after seeing spectacular results with this humble herb. Arnica Montana belongs to the Compositae family, in other words it is a relative of the common daisy. Several plants in this family are used homoeopathically and as an herb - Calendula, Chamomilla, Echinacea, Millefolium (yarrow), Solidago (golden rod) and Taraxacum (dandelion).

The star shaped flowers of this botanical family are familiar to us all as sunflowers and ornamental daisies. Other members of the Compositae family include food crops such as lettuce, chicory, globe artichoke and guayule which is a source of hypoallergenic latex.

The plants are rich in insulin, a compound between sugar and starch that the plants store in their underground organs as a source of energy. It is used as a natural sweetener for diabetics. The Compositae contain selenium, and arnica ash is rich in manganese. Both selenium and manganese are powerful antioxidants in the human body and in addition manganese is an essential element needed for healthy bones, wound healing and the metabolism of proteins, cholesterol and carbohydrates.

It may well be that it is this rich source of manganese that facilitates healing, acting in combination with the other plant chemicals. Manganese levels affect the levels of iron, magnesium and calcium in the body. Manganese deficiency is rarely seen (or recognised) except in individuals fed artificially through their veins. They develop abnormalities in the skeleton, impaired growth and skin rashes.

Arnica Montana is an alpine plant that grows in nutrient-poor soil. It can potentially reach a height of up to 60 cm, but this is unusual given the harsh conditions at high altitudes. It grows in meadows up to 3,000 metres above sea level, where it is exposed to strong sunlight. The higher the altitude, the more aromatic the plant will become.

It is found throughout Europe but nowadays it is more common to see hybrids of Arnica rather than the pure species growing wild. The natural habitat has been encroached upon by agriculture. Arnica cannot grow in areas where fertiliser has been used and aerial fertilisation has had a huge, negative impact on the wild population in the Voges Mountains of France. Arnica grows best in moist, peaty siliceous soils and chalk is harmful even in small quantities.

Arnica is in great demand as an herb and homoeopathically which has led to over harvesting. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) with other conservation agencies has drawn attention to this issue and thankfully many countries have responded by introducing legislation to protect the species. A license is required to collect the plant in many European countries but unfortunately this is almost impossible to police so the temptation to make money has taken precedence over the long-term maintenance of natural stock. Only Spain lacks prohibitive laws regarding arnica collection, yet 1,000 to 3,000 kg of wild arnica was imported into Germany from Romania in the period 1989 to 1999 according to figures obtained by WWF.

Responsible companies have attempted to farm arnica to cater for the demand, but it is a tricky plant to cultivate so their results have been mixed. It loves the harshness of its natural habitat and this is very challenging to reproduce commercially. Its inborn need to survive has led to cross breeding in the wild.

For centuries Arnica Montana has been used as an herb for bruising and sprains. Generations of Swiss mountain guides chewed arnica leaves to prevent fatigue induced by climbing. The dried leaves were used as a substitute for tobacco, hence its common name of mountain tobacco. The dried flowers

promote sneezing, so it was also known as snuff plant. Fall kraut, fall herb and wound herb, other eponyms, demonstrate the age-old use for the effects of trauma. The flowers are used as a compress for sprains and bruises. The bright yellow flowers glisten in the sunshine and can resemble the eyes of a wolf from a distance, hence the name Wolfesgelega, wolf's eye in German. Leopard's bane is a reference to its wild beauty and elegance, and independent spirit.

The root contains essential oils which are powerful anti-inflammatory agents and ski resorts are well versed in the benefits of arnica. As a herb, the plant has been used for traumatic injuries involving bruising and as a cardiac tonic for weak and weary hearts. It is also used homoeopathically to support the heart and for weakness and weariness in the elderly.

Arnica is also used to stimulate the kidneys but can be quite toxic in herbal solutions. The ingestion of large quantities can cause irritation to the gut; a temporary stimulation is followed by a depression of the circulation, respiration and temperature. Violent headaches ensue, the pupils dilate, and then muscular paralysis sets in. The whole nervous system is paralysed and death results. Arnica should be used judiciously on the skin as it can cause nasty irritating rashes.

Samuel Hahnemann first recognised the powerful actions of Arnica Montana and its potential toxicity. In homeopathy today it is used both as an herb in the form of creams and tinctures as well as in the potent form. The whole plant is used for the homeopathic remedy. The plant is often infested with small insects betraying its role as a victim. Fungi grow as parasites on the leaves. The plants have to be washed carefully before the remedy can be prepared.