

The East London Garden Society

Plant Facts

Goosegrass



You don't find Goosegrass. It finds you!

Covered with a multitude of small hooks, Goosegrass, clings onto almost everything it touches. In fact, it clings so well you don't have to take a bag with you to collect it. Indeed, the real headache with Goosegrass (aka Cleavers, Bedstraw, Stickywilly) is removing the debris. Hating to let anything go, a ball of Goosegrass forever makes a good plant to sieve most liquids.

Most people don't know but you can actually eat Goosegrass.

Young tips raw or boiled for 10 to 15 minutes make an excellent green and the seeds roasted make an excellent coffee substitute. Galium is actually in the same greater family as coffee. Older plants become laced with silicon and become too tough to eat.

Goosegrass is so called because geese love it along with most farm fowl and livestock. In USA and Canada varying restrictions are placed on Goosegrass. Its seed is prohibited or restricted in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, and Vermont. Kentucky calls it a threatening weed. The Canadian provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan list it as a noxious weed.

Botanically *Galium aparine* means 'milk seizer'. Juice from another member of the genus, *Gallium verum*, was used to curdle milk for cheese making.

Greek shepherds would use Goosegrass as a strainer for milk and other things. As a strainer you can bunch it up or make crosshatching layers.



The ancient Greeks called it philanthropon, 'man loving' from its clinging nature. It's a fun plant to introduce to kids because it sticks to their clothes.

Actually, four *Galiums* are used somewhat regularly. Besides curdling milk, the *Galium verum's* blossoms were used for colouring and scenting cheese and butter with a honey-like fragrance.

The flower tops are also used to make a refreshing drink. *Galium mollugo*, White Bedstraw, Revala,

is one of 56 leaves added to a ritual dish in Friuli, Italy. *Galium odoratum* is used for flavoring fruit cups and German Maywine. The dried leaves are a tea substitute and the flowers are eaten or used as a garnish.

As one might guess the genus has been used for medicinal purposes. Dried *Galium verum* has some coumarin in it and has been used to treat bladder and kidney problems including stones as well as dropsy and fever. It also has citric acid (which makes it refreshing as a drink) and that might have anti-tumor activity. Some think it lowers blood pressure and is anti-inflammatory. It can also prevent scurvy. Native Americans used *Galium pilosum* to prevent pregnancy. Goosegrass also strengthens your immune system and is good for your lymph system.

Galium triflorum and *Galium uniflorum* were used for the flu and as a diuretic. The Cherokee used *Galium circazans* for coughs, hoarseness, and asthma. For respiratory problems the Ojibwa used *Galium tinctorium* but *Galium triflorum* was the most used medicinally. They used it as in infusion for gallstones and a poultice to reduce swelling. The ladies also used it as a perfume and for washing hair. The root of the *Galium tinctorium* was also used for a red dye.

Galium aparine and *Galium tinctorium* are fairly easy to tell apart. *Galium aparine*, the edible one, has six to eight leaves in a whorl at a node and prefers dry areas. Its white flowers have four petals. The *Galium tinctorium*, the smaller of the two, has four to six leaves in a whorl and likes damp places. Its white flowers have three petals, sometimes four. While it would be nice if the *Galium tinctorium* were edible, no reference has been found that says it is. If you know otherwise, please let us know.