

Achillea millefolium - Yarrow

Synonyms: Sneezewort, Woundwort, Stauchweed, Knight's milfoil, Herba militaris, Yarroway

Botanical description:

Introduced from Europe to America, this plant is now naturalised across most of the USA, even surviving in a stunted form in the far North. Depending on conditions (altitude, climate etc) it may be as small as 12 - 15 cms. or as tall as 50 cms. Flowers are creamy white or pink tinged, the flowerheads (corymbs) up to 8 cms. in diameter. Each flowerhead is comprised of very many tiny florets, densely packed together. There are two types of florets: ray florets ringing each cluster of the corymb have a distinctive elongated petal with 2 notches; disc florets at the centre of each cluster have a corolla tube which is evenly notched to form 5 teeth. The leaves are between 5 - 20 cm. long and 1 - 4 cm. wide, bi or tri pinnatisect (divided) giving a feathery appearance. Basal leaves are longer and petiolate (stalked), upper leaves shorter and sessile (attached directly to the stem).

Actions

Anti-hemorrhagic / Astringent - reduces abnormal bleeding either applied topically to wounds, or drunk for internal bleeding conditions.

Diaphoretic - opens peripheral blood vessels and induces perspiration in feverish cases.

Antispasmodic - relaxes smooth muscles around the lungs, digestive tract, blood vessels and the reproductive & urinary organs

Hypotensive - reduces blood pressure by relaxing the muscles around arteries.

Bitter digestive stimulant - the taste triggers the entire digestive function from salivation through digestive enzymes, liver function and peristalsis.

Choleretic - the bitterness is especially stimulating to the release of bile from the gall bladder.

Anti-inflammatory - the soothing and healing effects of the volatile oils reduce inflammation in many body parts.

Emmenagogue and female regulator - helps to normalize the female systems. Flowers are the strongest part for this purpose.

Venous tonic and Anti-thrombotic - Yarrow exerts an amphoteric (paradoxical) effect in the blood vessels by acting as a tonic to the walls, smoothing and strengthening them so that clots have less opportunity of forming.

Carminative - by promoting digestive function and relaxing muscles around the gut, it reduces gas, bloating & cramping, and promotes easy digestion.

Constituents and therapeutic applications

Volatile oil

This is present in all parts of the plant. 0.5% is present in the flowers and 0.007% - 0.1% in the leaves.

Thujone has known anti-fungal, anti-microbial and immuno-stimulating effects. In large doses it has a strongly irritant effect on the mucosa and musculature of the digestive tract and may cause degeneration of liver and spleen cells. It has an abortifacient effect and In very high doses it will cause fits and convulsions and brain damage, and may even be fatal.

Cineol (up to 10%) has anti-spasmodic, carminative, antiseptic, anthelmintic and expectorant properties.

Chamazulene has soothing, anti-inflammatory and anti-allergic effects. It is extracted by steam distillation and gives a blue color to the volatile oil.

Alpha bisabolol is strongly anti-inflammatory. There are at least 4 different chemotypes of Chamomile based on the different types of bisabolol: *bisabolol*, *bisabolol oxide A*, *bisabolol oxide B* and *bisabolol oxide A*. Medicinally the pure bisabolol type is preferred.

Eugenol is a powerful antimicrobial. It is also somewhat irritant and tonifying to the mucus membranes

Pinene has anti-inflammatory and cooling properties.

Borneol is a powerful anti-microbial, showing up to 90% inhibition of oxygen uptake and energy production by bacteria.

Caryophylline has anti-allergic, anti-inflammatory and hepatic stimulating actions.

Achillein is bitter and gives the digestive stimulant effect to the whole plant. It is specifically an appetite enhancer and a choleric.

Tannins

These are astringent and provide the anti-hemorrhagic action for which achillea is so famous. With prolonged use this can even be effective for increasing the rate of blood clotting. This is balanced and regulated by the *fumarocoumarin* which tends to be anti-coagulant. Thus Achillea contains its own inbuilt system of checks and balances. The tannins of Achillea have a particular focus of action on the peripheral venous system and the reproductive organs.

A photosensitive fluorescent principle

This may cause a photosensitive dermatitis in certain sensitive individuals if it is applied directly onto the skin in conjunction with exposure to sunlight.

Stigma, sito & erythro sterin

Possibly responsible for the hormonal regulating and balancing action exhibited by the flower.

Therapeutic uses

Digestive system

Chronic indigestion, Gastritis, Gastric & duodenal ulcers, Anorexia (weight loss), Digestive atony (especially in combination with Zingiber off.), as a general tonic for the digestive mucosa.

Cardio-vascular system

Amphoteric effect on peripheral circulation (vasodilator or vasoconstrictor as required by the body). Tones flaccid vessels and relaxes constricted vessels. Trophorestorative (strengthening) for venules. Useful for Varicose veins, Phlebitis, Venous stasis, bleeding states and persistent hypertension. Possibly should be avoided in Thrombosis.

Female reproductive system

Regulates and normalizes the length of the menstrual cycle - an amphoteric action to restore it to the optimum. Useful for amenorrhoea, menorrhagia, metrorrhagia, leucorrhoea, vaginitis, endometriosis, fibroids and uterine tumors.

Urinary system

Volatile oils are antiseptic in the kidneys and bladder therefore useful in all cases of urinary tract infection, especially where there is hematuria.

Respiratory system

Inhibits excessive secretions of the mucus membranes therefore useful for head colds or productive coughs. Also beneficial for hemoptysis and all colds.

Other uses

As a diaphoretic the flowers are preferred while the leaves have more of the astringent action. Useful for fevers and flues, as a skin wash for infected or poorly healing wounds, as a douche for vaginal conditions, as an eye wash for inflammations or irritations.

Pharmacy

The **tincture** is made to a 1:5 strength with 45% alcohol. The recommended dose is 2 - 4 mLs. tid..

The **infusion** is made with 30 g. dried plant material to 500 mLs. of water. It should be made in a thermos flask or tightly covered pan to preserve the volatile oil.

The dried plant is preferred to avoid any risk of skin reactions.

Folklore and Historic Use

The Latin name of this plant is attributed to Achilles, the warrior who appealed to the gods for protection before leading his people to battle. Supposedly he was given protection by being grasped by the ankle and immersed in a vat of Yarrow tea. Of course his ankle then was unprotected - the *Achilles heel*. More likely is that the herb was used on the battlefield to staunch bleeding, hence the common names alluding to battles and wounds. The name *Yarrow* is a corruption of the old Anglo-Saxon name *gearwe* and the Dutch *yerw*. The name *millefolium* refers to the “thousand feathery” leaf. It has been employed as a snuff and is sometimes called “Old Man’s Pepper” for this reason. In ancient days it was popular as an aromatic strewing herb and in Scandinavia it is commonly used to make a sort of beer.