

Materia Medica

Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*)

Common names - Yarrow, milfoil, thousand leaf, nosebleed, millefolium, ladies' mantle, noble yarrows, thousand seed, old man's pepper; plumajillo (Span.)

Identifying Characteristics - A perennial plant of the composite family, the daisy family, which have in common the fact that the flowers are made up of many individual florets. Yarrow has a rough angular stem and grows to heights of 3 feet. Its leaves are alternate 1-6 inches in length, pinnatifid, clasp the stem at the base, are slightly woolly and are cut into very fine segments. The flowers are grayish-white or pinkish in color, with 4-6 florets in each head.



Odor - Pungently aromatic, faint and pleasant.

Taste - Bitter, astringent and rough, insipid

Habitat - Common in pastures, grassy banks, hedgerows, waysides, waste places, especially in dry sunny conditions. Throughout the British Isles, Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand and Asia.

Cultivation - Yarrow may be grown from seed or cuttings of the creeping rhizome in any soil in a sunny spot. It is likely to spread. Plant in rows.

Parts Used - Stem, leaves and flowers.

Harvesting Time - Yarrow flowers between June and October, when collecting the herb, cut closely to the ground.

Drying and Preparing - Yarrow should be dried in gentle heat, or in the cold as quickly as possible. The stems should be discarded. The simplest way of using the herb is by making an infusion of it in a covered pot. For a sitz bath or rinse, a handful of the herb is made into an infusion with a 1/2 quart of water and the result added to the bath or used directly to rinse the body's surface as required.

Medicinal Properties - Volatile oils, which has anti-inflammatory action, diuretic, diaphoretic, stimulant, astringent, tonic, alterative, emmenagogue, vulnerary.

Applications - The reputation of yarrow in history is firmly established and was well known and respected by the time the Ancient Greeks had praised its ability to staunch wounds in battle. In fact, this plant is notable for the variety of useful actions it has been credited with. A glance at the list of constituents will support many of these claims, as will the fact that the different traditions agree on many of them. It will be suggested here that many of these actions combine to make yarrow the ideal fever remedy, but there are many other conditions which will benefit from its use. It has the following actions:

For staunching wounds and internal hemorrhage of the lungs and bowels, Catarrhal conditions of the mucosal membranes, enteritis and diarrhea, excessive menstruation, rinse for falling hair, improves the appetite, settles digestion, stimulates flow of bile and improves liver function, intestinal colic, stomach and other cramps, nervous dyspepsia, palpitations, asthma, toning blood vessels and veins, improving hemorrhoids, lowers blood pressure lightly, improves melancholy and moodiness with beneficial effects on the central nervous system.

Toxicity – While essentially a very safe herb, there are a few cautions in its use. Excessive doses can cause headaches and vertigo: this is not in itself dangerous but in pregnancy there is the possibility of uterine contractions and in this case at least moderation is called for. Like many other plants with volatile oils and resins, yarrow may cause a contact dermatitis in susceptible individuals, but as a very rare occurrence.

Conclusion - Yarrow is a most useful and versatile herb and has found much favor in the herbal traditions. As is often the case different aspects of its character have been emphasized at different times; however, what we shall be doing here is trying to understand the herb as a whole.

It is probable that apart from its locally astringent effects yarrow has been used mainly for its digestive and circulatory properties. For example, much has been made of its ability both to stimulate and restore digestive activities and yet also relax the nervous component of digestion, and through the astringent effect on the intestine, reduce hyperactivity of the bowel. In other words, by selectively stimulating and relaxing aspects of the digestive system, it improves both digestion and absorption. This sort of rounded action is common to the herbal remedies and is a result of the great complexity in their components.

There are a variety of actions on the circulatory system. Yarrow seems to act directly on the blood vessels, especially the veins, in some way 'toning' their wall and/or internal surface: thus, apart from its application to varicose veins, yarrow has been used by professional practitioners in cases where there is a risk of thrombosis. This action is backed up by an effect on the circulation as a whole, including an opening-up of

circulation to the skin, and a slowing of any fast heart rate: the whole effect being that of gently lowering the blood pressure in certain cases. Yarrow can thus be seen as a relaxing yet restorative circulatory remedy, applicable as a gently influence on cases marked by 'tension' in the circulation. One such case is the normal reaction to a rise in body temperature, the fever, and here, of course, there is a direct cooling effect resulting from the shift of blood to the skin and sweat glands.

The ability of yarrow to resolve fevers has been demonstrated experimentally and from what has been said so far, at least one mechanism for this effect can be understood. There are, however, other factors involved in this action. The usually quietened, or sometimes disturbed, digestive system is variously stimulated and relaxed in a generally most beneficial way; the high pulse rate and general over activity of the heart is reduced; colic, cramps, convulsions, are all made less likely; any catarrhal involvement in the fever responds to yarrow's direct action; there is a supportive stimulating effect on an often exhausted nervous system.

There are important questions to ask in using an herb for fever. When it is necessary to turn down the thermostat in the brain, a remedy like yarrow lowers body temperature through an effect on several body processes and, in addition, actively supports other bodily functions often deficient at the time. It is thus quite possible that yarrow can help the body clear out its problems without having to resort to the full fever syndrome. The key to yarrow's contribution here is probably its effects on the digestion (a great many fevers arise or are perpetuated by disorders of digestion or absorption), on the mucosal membranes, or the lining of the blood vessels and on the nervous system: these are positive contributions to body function and nicely balance the relaxing effects of cooling the blood at the skin, slowing the heart rate and reducing spasm of smooth muscle. One can add to the possible positive actions the fact that when sweat is produced it positively carries out quite a deal of metabolic waste, and so all diaphoretics are actually 'cleansing' remedies. There is further evidence that yarrow promotes excretion at the kidney: this would be obviously supplement at any cleansing action.

It is likely, therefore, that yarrow can be used in fevers with less risk of suppressing them. This would be especially so if it were used in combination with other remedies particularly suitable for the individual case, some of which are mentioned later in this lesson. Adding elderflower, for example, would make a very useful mixture for fevers affecting the lungs and respiratory system; the addition of garlic to any fever remedy will greatly enhance its cleansing properties. Having said this, however, there are still times when it is not completely suitable to use yarrow, or indeed other febrifuge remedies. In general, it is found that the best times to use yarrow are very early in the fever, when it may be possible to solve the problem painlessly, and when the fever has reached a peak and during convalescence afterwards, when yarrow will help resolve the problem more effectively. During the active rising stage of fever it is probably better merely to keep the process under control, and not let the temperature rise too highly, rather than seeking to cancel it out altogether: It is generally better to allow the body time to come to terms with the problem on its own terms once it has started.

There are other problems that will benefit from the use of yarrow, of course. It is useful for colic and nervous tensions and spasms, and these properties combine with an action on the female reproductive system to make yarrow an ideal remedy for period pains and scanty periods. Yarrow is to be recommended as a hair rinse, with rosemary and peppermint for dandruff and falling hair, and cosmetically it makes a very useful cleansing and astringent lotion.