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Everything You Need to Know About the Amazing Comfrey Plant

By Ethan Clarkson



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For those of us who like to get the most out of our gardens, selecting plant that serve more than one purpose is the way to go! One of my favorite herbs, the comfrey plant, is a multitasking master. It can be used as a nutrient-rich mulch, a beautiful pollinator attractor, and a “compost booster”. Additionally, it has been used a medicine for at least 2500 years. Read on to learn why you need this spectacular plant in your own garden.

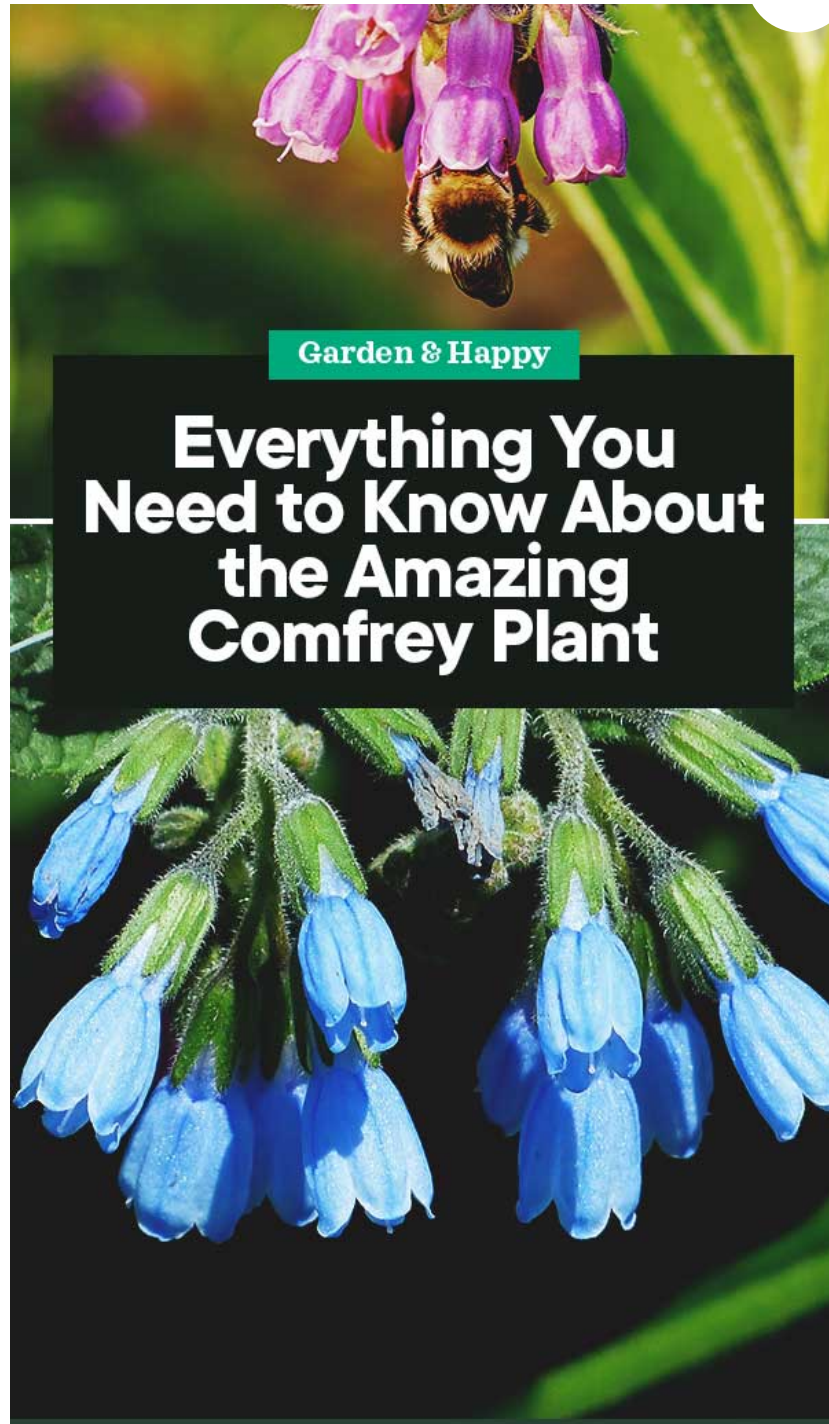


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One thing to keep in mind when planting comfrey is permanence. Comfrey is a deep-rooted perennial, so planning out where to start a patch is very important. Attempting to dig out all of the root system to move your comfrey patch is easier said than done. You can't leave even one little piece of its tap root in the soil. Otherwise, you'll soon see a brand new comfrey plant popping out of the ground.

There are at least 35 recognized types of comfrey that have been cultivated. By far, the most common type found is "Bocking 14"—a [Russian comfrey](#) (*Symphytum x uplandicum*). It's actually just a hybrid of common comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*) and rough comfrey (*Symphytum asperum*).





Garden & Happy

Everything You Need to Know About the Amazing Comfrey Plant

Soil Requirements



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Any average, well-drained soil will work fine to grow your comfrey, but it prefers moist, fertile soil. It's not too particular about pH, but a neutral to acidic range of 6.0 – 7.0 is just about right. To get the most out of your comfrey plant, add some nitrogen into the soil. Working a bit of compost in before planting should do the trick. It'll return this favor by growing lots of thick vegetation throughout the growing season, which you can use for various reasons.

You can easily start comfrey by seed, but it needs a winter chill to germinate properly. An alternative is to just purchase a comfrey plant from a nursery. They're fairly common and shouldn't be much trouble to find. Comfrey excels at self-sowing its seeds, causing it to spread quicker than you may want it to.

If you don't want your patch to spread too quickly, try the aforementioned "Bocking 14" variety. It's sterile, and therefore won't spread by seed—it's propagated by root cuttings instead. A three- to-six-inch root section can be planted horizontally about two to six inches deep. Make sure to plant deeper in sandy soil, and shallower in clay soil.

A healthy comfrey plant can bush out to 4 feet and reach a height of 3-5 feet tall. If you're planting several near each other, plant them at least 3 feet apart. You can expect to see their violet, pink, or creamy yellow flowers in late spring or early summer.

Growing Zones



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Comfrey can grow in full sun or partial shade, but will begin to wilt if exposed extremely hot, dry conditions. If you're in a hot climate, it's best to figure out some type of irrigation to get the best from your comfrey plant. It's frost tolerant and hardy in zones 4-9. The leaves can take temperatures of 15 degrees and still survive, and the roots can survive to -40 degrees! Depending on your location, it'll die back each winter and return each new season, healthier and larger than the previous.

Attracting Pollinators

This plant's small, bell-shaped flowers are wonderful pollinator attractors. I've seen all sorts of different types of bees, ladybugs, ants, and butterflies visiting

mine regularly. My 4th year comfrey really puts off a lot of flowers, so there's always a lot of buzzing and fluttering about around it.

Harvesting Your Comfrey Plant

Focus on keeping your plant happy during the first growing season so it develops a healthy root system. Wait until the second season to begin harvesting. Once your comfrey is about two feet tall, you'll be able to begin harvesting the leaves. If you start cutting leaves any sooner there's a good chance that it won't grow any of its pollinator attracting flowers!

The leaves are kind of prickly, so you may want to wear gloves when trimming. It's not just the leaves that can be harvested for making medicine either. Its roots and flowers can also be harvested for their medicinal attributes.

Medicinal Properties



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The Romans and Greeks cultivated comfrey as far back as 400BC for its medicinal properties. Its Latin name, *Symphytum*, comes from Greek words meaning “growing together of bones” and “plant”. Besides being used to mend broken bones it’s also used for healing wounds and lung ailments, stopping heavy bleeding, and for topical skin treatments.

Even though it’s been used in traditional medicine for centuries, it’s strongly suggested to not take it internally. According to newer research, doing so can damage the liver and lungs, and even cause cancer.

If you cut yourself when you’re in your garden, just grab two leaves and rub them together to knock off the leaves’ prickly hairs. Mash up a leaf to make a poultice and gently put onto the cut, then wrap the other leaf around the wound. The comfrey will help staunch the bleeding, and will help kickstart the healing process. I cut myself pretty often, unfortunately... but, after learning this trick, I now cherish my comfrey patch even more than before!

A Great Addition to Personal Care Products



Comfrey is also one of the main herbal ingredients I use when I make healing salves and soaps. It's great for topical wounds, so I like to combine it with other herbs that have similar strengths. A very effective and simple salve can be made using chopped plantain, calendula, yarrow flower, and comfrey. I use this for all skin-related problems: burns, rashes, cuts, scrapes and eczema.

A very basic explanation of this recipe is to infuse olive oil with the chopped herbs, combining them all in a jar left in direct sunlight for 3 weeks. (Just simmer the herbs in a double boiler if you're in a hurry.) After your oil is infused, strain out the herbs with a cheesecloth. Add some melted beeswax to this to solidify it enough so that it can be kept in a jar at room temperature.

A Great Companion Plant



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Comfrey is an awesome [companion plant](#) for several reasons, If you have fruit trees or an orchard, I suggest growing them there. This will keep them from spreading in your garden, and your fruit trees will directly benefit from this new plant friendship.

The main reason I suggest planting comfrey under fruit trees is the potassium boost trees will get by having it near. Potassium is one of the essential minerals needed for proper growth and reproduction. The deep tap root captures potassium and other nutrients far below the surface, making them available as mulch when the plant dies back each season. These nutrients are slowly released back into the soil as the leaves decompose.

An added bonus you will get from planting comfrey under your tree, is that you'll create a "micro-climate". (This is a climate that differs from the surrounding area.) Comfrey's long tap root helps it to be a pretty drought-tolerant herb, allowing it to keep large leaves all season long. As morning fogs pass over, droplets of water collect on the leaves, and are drawn down to the roots below. This extra bit of retained moisture helps to keep the soil around your tree from drying out, even during the hottest parts of summer.

A Compost Booster



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As mentioned before, comfrey's deep tap roots pull out nutrients from much further down in the soil than most other plants. A lot of these nutrients end up

in above-ground plant parts: leaves, stems, and flowers. This wealth of nutrients can easily be shared with the rest of your garden!

To help give your compost pile a nutrient boost, chop up any of these parts that you prune off your plant and toss them in. To help them break down faster, chop them into pieces about 2-3 inches. Mix these pieces into your compost, or place them around specific plants or fruit trees as a mulch. You can prune your comfrey plant 4-5 times a year and it will keep coming back each time, ready for more.

Liquid Fertilizer



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If you decide to grow a lot of comfrey, you can make a liquid fertilizer out of its trimmings. You can easily make it in a food-grade bucket or barrel. Fill 3/4 of the your container with comfrey trimmings, and then fill with water. You'll want to cover it and let it steep for 3-6 weeks. The biggest downfall is the smell created in the process, but it's worth it!

You can dilute this fertilizer if you want to, or apply it full strength. Apply to your

plants when they're fruiting or as needed. Also, don't apply before a rainfall, as most of the nutrients will get washed away back into the soil.

I hope this beautiful perennial will become a welcome guest in your garden this season. I've fallen in love with it so much that every spring I take root cuttings, and spread it anywhere I have room.





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