Ground Ivy

Glechoma hederacea

This indomitable weed is the bane of many a gardener, but it does have virtues to offer. A low-growing perennial, it often thrives even through the winter under a foot of snow. It spreads by rooting nodes along the stem, which means that trampling it only helps it to grow. Be sure not to confuse it with henbit, deadnettle, or self-heal.

A member of the mint family, it can often be smelled before it is seen, and these aromatics give it several useful properties. It’s useful as a decongestant when made into a steam inhalation, and in fact will often clear not only your sinuses, but your mind as well. It has a long-standing reputation as being useful against long-standing coughs, such as those that linger after a cold or flu. Since it’s a drying type of herb, it would be best suited to damp coughs, but could be used for dry ones as well by mixing more moistening herbs into the formula. Taken as a tea, it will help to relax the muscles of the gastrointestinal tract, which can help with minor stomach upset and flatulence.

The high level of volatile essential oils (responsible for its fragrance) give this herb antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties. It also means that it serves as a diuretic by mildly irritating the kidneys and encouraging flushing. It can therefore be helpful, combined with other, buffering herbs, in treating infections of the urinary system. It has been said to help remove and dissolve kidney and bladder stones; while that doesn’t mean it will completely cure the problem, it can make the process of passing them a bit easier.

As an astringent plant, ground ivy has historically been used topically for “running sores and ulcers.” The astringency also compliments its antimicrobial actions in combating infections. It also makes a useful eyewash (see violet) for itchy, runny eyes and where there is excess inflammation and mucous discharge.

As a counterpoint to its aromatics, it is also quite a bitter plant, and as such, is beneficial to the liver has long been revered as a restorative tonic. One of its names – alehoof – refers to its popularity in brewing beer before standardization came along. From what I’ve heard, the diuretic properties come through quite strongly in this brew.

Ground ivy is one of a handful of herbs that has recently been researched for its ability to bind heavy metals and allow their excretion. It was once used, in fact, to treat “painter’s colic”, or lead poisoning, and some herbalists are now exploring that territory again. It should be noted, however, that long-standing toxins are often sequestered by the human body, and releasing them into the system – even for the purpose of removal – should be done with the utmost care and only by those with considerable experience.

Many of this herb’s uses are due to its general properties, which it shares with a number of other plants, but nothing else matches its affinity for the ears. It is the only plant I know of that will, as a tea or tincture, target congestion in the Eustachian tubes and help it to drain. It has been used with great success in relieving tinnitus, especially due to injury, though it may take several months of use before improvement is seen (or heard…). Matthew Wood reports excellent results from using it to treat middle ear infections, or cases where a sore throat spreads upwards into the ears.

Susan Weed tells of a traditional use among midwives: that an infusion (or ½ - 1 tsp. of tincture) drunk after a birth will help to bring down the placenta, and continuing with a couple cups of tea per day will ease afterpains and help with uterine tone.

