Motherwort

Leonurus cardiaca

This is a distinctive and striking herb, both in appearance and actions. In fact, the dual nature of the name describes it well: “motherwort” refers to its actions on the female reproductive system and related issues, while the botanical name translates as “lion-heart,” a testament to its beneficial effects on the cardiovascular system. These two seemingly disparate affinities are tied together elegantly by the herb’s specific actions as a nervine and bitter tonic.

Motherwort is designated as an emmenagogue, which means that it stimulates uterine contractions. However, it seems in fact to be amphoteric: stimulating or relaxing the uterus depending on what’s needed, making it useful in relieving cramps. It is specifically indicated where there’s stress and tension manifesting through the muscles. The herb eaten plain (which I don’t recommend, it does not taste good) or as a tea will usually bring on menstruation if the time is anywhere near right, but this effect is much less pronounced in the tincture. On the other end of the spectrum, motherwort is highly respected for its helpfulness in easing the turmoil of menopause. It can abate the frequency and intensity of hot flashes and renew the strength and tone of reproductive tissues. Where it really stands out, though, is in easing the hormonal and emotional discord that often accompanies this passage. It has long been used, as well, in soothing both the physical and emotional upset that follows childbirth, lending support and resilience to the new mother.

As a heart tonic, it will indeed strengthen and balance the system in a general way, but where it shines is in instances of excessive stress, chronic tension and anxiety, where these manifest as cardiac disturbances such as arrhythmias and tachycardia, and often high blood pressure. In such cases it works on both the cardiac and nervous systems. I have found that the tincture is wonderfully helpful for this, both short-term as a calmative and long-term to help realign our deep-seated reactions to what can often seem like a threatening world. Its nervine effects aren’t limited to cardiac symptoms; in any cases of nervous tension, excessive worry, insomnia, etc. it can be very helpful either alone or in formula with other herbs.

A somewhat lesser-known use of motherwort, though one that fits with its balancing effects on the endocrine system, is in treating hyperthyroidism and Grave’s Disease. It serves both to reduce the over-production of thyroid hormones and to directly ease such associated symptoms as palpitations. This begs the question of whether, then, it would worsen hypothyroid conditions. While it’s a theoretical risk and worth bearing in mind, to my knowledge there have been no reports, either published or anecdotal, of such aggravation.

Another synergistic aspect of motherwort is its use as a digestive bitter. Bitters have many beneficial effects, mainly on the gut. They stimulate secretion of digestive enzymes and bile, and coordinate peristalsis, which improves digestion and assimilation of nutrients. They also tone the lining of the digestive tract, reducing permeability and any associated inflammatory response. They stimulate the liver, aiding detoxification; as an interesting aside, one thing that the liver regularly detoxifies is excess hormones. The gut has been called the “second brain,” and is responsible for a large part of our dopamine and serotonin production. It has the ability to act independently on the nervous system. If our digestion is poor, odds are we will feel chronically stressed out. Motherwort’s bitter taste therefore adds another layer to its calming, protective properties.

This herb should be gathered while in flower, usually late spring to mid summer. Take only the top 1/3 or so, being sure to leave some flowers on the plant. It may be tinctured fresh or dried.

