Chickweed

Stellaria media

This lovely little plant is truly a treasure. It’s one of the first herbs to emerge in the springtime – often hanging on even under the snow – and tends to wilt and disappear when the weather really warms up. It’s relatively easy to identify by the rotating single line of hairs along the stem (often tinged with pink) and the 5 petals so deeply cleft that they appear to be 10. Everything above ground is edible and has a lovely crunchy-juicy green taste reminiscent of sweet corn.

Chickweed is excellent topically as a soothing, cooling poultice for burns, scrapes, eczema, or poison ivy rashes. Just pick some, chew it up – or smash it to a pulp in some other way if you’re applying it to someone who objects to your spit – and press it onto the affected area. It also makes a wonderful all-purpose skin salve (or a base for such a salve) when combined with an equal amount of plantain and infused in oil. Being such a watery plant, I do recommend that if you do this, you use heat for the oil extraction.

Internally, it acts as a soothing, nutritive diuretic and lymphatic stimulant. It’s not much used in acute illness, but taken over time, it will help keep the body clear of wastes and the immune system functioning smoothly. An exception is where there are noticeably swollen lymph glands, in which case this would be a good herb to include, perhaps with echinacea and/or violet.

The most pleasant way to use this plant is simply to eat it while it’s in season; it goes nicely in salad or added to a sandwich like sprouts, or just as a snack on its own. A tea would, in theory, be quite nice, but this is a plant that degrades quickly once it dries, so you don’t see it used this way very often. I like to make a tincture and an oil of the fresh plant in the springtime and use them as needed. One of my favorite things to do is infuse it in apple cider vinegar along with a bit of dandelion and violet. I take a tablespoon or two every day or so as a nice clearing, mineral-rich spring tonic.

