Burdock

Arctium lappa, A. minus

If you’ve ever spent time exploring the edges of fields and neglected railway corridors, or perhaps just an overgrown backyard, collecting burrs on your socks and hair, you are familiar with burdock. It’s often regarded as a menace due to those seed-pods and its incredible tenacity, but it is also one of our best medicines.

The seed are diuretic, and traditionally used to treat such issues as kidney stones, gout, and rheumatism. There is also reference to their employment as sebaceous tonics (to normalize the function of oil glands in the skin). While there are herbalists today who follow these practices, it’s not particularly common and I haven’t done so myself. The leaves have a somewhat obscure use as a poultice: bruised or blanched and applied to a boil, they are said to bring it to a head, and to act as a strong antimicrobial against the bacteria associated with such eruptions. Blended with egg whites or butter and applied to burns, they have been known to relieve pain, prevent infection, and promote healing. The stems and shoots, early in the year, can be peeled and eaten raw or cooked as a vegetable.

It’s the root, however, that embodies the essence of this herb. It is a top-notch alterative, and commonly referred to as a blood purifier due to the specific way in which it acts on the liver. For this reason, as well as its apparent normalizing action on the sebaceous glands, it is the herb of choice for addressing such skin conditions as eczema, psoriasis, and acne from the inside out (although, while burdock alone will sometimes work, often other herbs and lifestyle factors need to be considered). It’s also gently diuretic, alkalizing and promotes healthy kidney function. It’s a true nourishing metabolic tonic that aids in absorption and assimilation of nutrients, and helps to clear waste from the body.

It’s rich in inulin, which feeds beneficial flora in the gut, causing a beneficial effect in cases of gut dysbiosis. It has been shown to help balance blood sugar levels, and possibly reduce absorption of sugar from the intestines. It acts on the endocrine system as well, nourishing the pituitary and easing fluctuations in hormone levels. This is something to consider during stressful times, when the need for bodily nourishment may coincide with emotional instability.

Burdock root is a beautiful balance of food and medicine, rich in thiamine, iron, magnesium, silicon, and many other nutrients. Just as important, there’s really no way to overdose on it. While powerful and wide-ranging in its effects, it is exceedingly gentle, always nudging us toward balance and health without being pushy.

In Asian cuisine, it’s known as gobo and consumed regularly. It has a sweet, earthy flavor with just a touch of bitterness. It can be sliced and stir-fried or added to sushi. Grated and lightly steamed, it’s delicious tossed with soy sauce. It makes a nutritious and strengthening addition to broths and stews. For a root, it extracts nicely in hot water without any particular need to simmer.

Burdock is a biennial, forming a rosette of large leaves in its first year, and sending up a stalk that flowers in its second. The time to harvest is in late fall of the first year or early spring of the next. Once the stalk is more than eight inches or so tall, the root is essentially spent. If you plan to gather this, be prepared for a good day’s work; it often reaches 2 – 3 feet into the ground and doesn’t come out willingly.

