

# Wild & Free

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## ***Plantago lanceolata*** **Ribwort or Narrow-leaved Plantain**

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When I started to learn about the medicine found in plants I felt that I'd been given the keys to a secret kingdom. I'd been blind, but now could see. Surrounding me on all sides was medicine, a world of plants inhabiting their own kingdom, interacting with us, but in no way beholden or reliant on us noticing them and their power.

### **Early memories**

My earliest memories of *Plantago lanceolata* was of play. Chasing games with my brother using the seed heads to whip each other, or firing the flower heads at him in the form of a plant gun. Later I learned to rub the leaves on insect bites to soothe the itch. These were weeds that you couldn't help but notice, because of their proudly standing upright seed heads.

### **Plant First Aid**

My first true appreciation of the power and medicinal value of plants was through an experience with *Plantago lanceolata*, as a newly qualified naturopath and medical herbalist. It was where I learned that herbs don't have to be extracted in alcohol to have therapeutic power, that raw and free and unfettered can be equally effective. A group of us were in a paddock, near a seaside community called Tongaporutu, which is about 45 minutes from New Plymouth city. My brother and four other men were helping to move a huge metal safe from a shed, and despite the brute power of all these men they managed to drop the safe onto my brother Johnny's foot. In a great deal of pain with some help he limped over to the car where I was sitting with friends. When I looked at his foot I could see already in the space of a couple of minutes that a huge purple egg-shaped lump was developing on the top of his jandalled foot. It was around an inch high and was around 2 inches wide by 3 inches long and was looking very sore and he suspected it was broken.

- Sustainable  
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I looked around at all the kikuyu grass growing and thought what on earth can I do for this? We are in the middle of nowhere, and not able to leave straight away. So, I raised his leg and wandered off searching amongst the grass for salvation. There standing tall, waving gently in the breeze was the stems of narrow leaved plantain. I had a memory flash of its ability to treat contusions, and after asking the plants permission I gathered the leaves and began to industriously chew them. I approached my brother and indicated that I wanted to put the chewed mass onto his foot. You can imagine how unimpressed he was with that idea, but being in a lot of pain he allowed me to place the masticated ribwort over the still swelling contusion. I continued to chew and add to the poultice, and after ten minutes he told me with a great deal of surprise that the pain had reduced dramatically. Within 30 minutes we noticed that the swelling was starting to reduce. By the time we arrived back at the bach he was feeling well enough to not go to town to a hospital, so after a shower and a reapplication of another plantain poultice he left for bed. Much to the amazement of myself and the rest of the group by the morning the swelling had completely gone, there was no bruising at all, and the pain had disappeared. It was a dramatic healing, and from that day onwards my brother continued to call me Dr. Quinn: Medicine Woman!

When we look at the actions of *Plantago lanceolata* the reason it was so effective in this situation become evident. We know that it is anti-haemorrhagic, anti-inflammatory, vulnerary and astringent, and is rich in tannins and some mucilage. Ribwort has an ability to clear toxic heat, support lymphatic flow, eliminate swelling and contusions, especially where there is pain or bleeding and treat external tissue trauma.

When you spend some time with *Plantago lanceolata* it will teach you about these very same applications. When we look at the deeply indented and veined leaves and stems we see a powerful signature for the veins and circulatory system, and the removal of blood and lymph. The base of the leaves and seed pods are a glorious crimson colour which might indicate an affinity for blood. The taste of the leaves is slightly astringent and bitter, with a mineralized salty and almost fishy smell. The astringent tannin rich taste tells us that this plant can dry up secretions and accumulated fluids, and the bitter taste is anti-inflammatory and deeply cooling to the body, especially the kind of toxic heat that can be manufactured in a rapidly swelling contusion. Bitter is also an indication of an antimicrobial application in a plant, and when the leaves are crushed ribwort releases an enzyme which together with the constituent aucubin produces *aucubigenin*, which is highly bacteriostatic (Holmes, 2006, pp. 615-6). At the base of the leaves foaming bubbles are trapped there, which indicate a soothing mucilaginous nature to the plant, perfect for applying to a painful swelling. From all of this we might see a plant with the ability to heal a painful, bruised and swollen contusion. Plants can be our greatest teachers, when we open all our senses and our intuition.

## Breathe Deeply

*Plantago lanceolata* has a brother plant called *Plantago major*, which is also known as rat tail plantain or broad-leaved plantain. Whilst *P. major* is most suited to resolving intestinal and urinary tract health complaints, *P. lanceolata* has an affinity for the respiratory tract, particularly of an infectious or allergic nature. When we consider herbal actions such as anticatarrhal, anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, astringent, and respiratory demulcent, its ability to treat hay fever, chronic sinusitis, nasopharyngeal and lower respiratory catarrh, pharyngitis, asthma and coughs all become self-evident. Perhaps consider ribwort for the client who suffers from food allergies or intolerances or seasonal reactions to pollens, which presents as hay fever, profuse mucous, or asthma.



Once more, when we tune into our senses ribwort stands ready to teach us about these medicinal applications. The leaves grow from a stem which curves in on itself in a gentle half-moon, which then widens out into a leaf which is deeply indented, before narrowing into a tip again. This leaf opening from a sense of tightness and constriction into a wider opening, with a clearly marked leaf venation for the free passage of nutrients, but also to guide substances such as water to the centre of the plant, may indicate its affinity for opening up constricted airways. All over the leaves and seed pods are tiny cilia-like hairs, and at the base



ABOVE: Narrow-leaved plantain flower head

IMAGE: By Isidre blanc (Own work) [CC BY-SA 4.0 Wiki Commons]

of stem below most of the leaves are longer creamy-caramel soft and delicate and yet surprisingly strong hairs. The human body has cilia hairs in many key places including the respiratory tract, which is one of the ways waste and mucous is moved out of the body. At the tip of the seed head there are creamy yellow delicate flowers, which dance on the end of tiny hair-like anthers, which flutter with the vibratory power of a bee's wing. This reminds me of raw local honey's ability to treat sneezing and mucous from hay fever. The taste of ribwort also has stories to share, as the bitter and astringent taste of ribwort once more indicate their antimicrobial actions and an ability to clear mucous from the body, with the slight mucilaginous taste indicating its soothing respiratory demulcent function.

## Survive and Thrive

*Plantago lanceolata* is a survivor. We see ribwort naturalised and growing abundantly in paddocks and coastal areas, but it will happily sprout from a crack in a foot path or even from walls. The simple parallel veins indicate an ancient lineage, much like *Ginkgo biloba*. When looking at the root structure it develops many fine hair-like roots, with a larger central tap root. The roots grow along the top of the ground but also burrow deeply into the earth, which keeps the plant stabilized and grounded deeply. Tuning into ribwort the message I received is that this plant can teach you how to not only survive, but how to thrive on stress. We know that when ribwort is damaged, such as from being mowed or eaten, it will increase the iridoid constituents which have many medicinal benefits. Including the normalisation of blood sugar levels, it will support a healthy inflammatory response, assist the circulatory and immune systems, encourage healthy angiogenesis which allows the formation of new blood vessels to feed cellular growth, reduces aging factors and enhances cognitive function (Johnson, 2012). The silicic acid is well known to keep our bones and joints healthy and our skin youthful, so perhaps ribwort will assist the eternal quest for youthfulness and longevity?!

This direct and forthright plant isn't afraid to make itself known. Ribwort doesn't hide away amongst the other plants in the paddock, it sends out long flowering seed heads to wave madly in the breeze, reminding us to dance and play, to do more than just exist or survive, but to choose to also thrive. As Marianne Williamson famously declaimed "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do...and as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

## Medicinal Nitty Gritty

Ribwort is considered to be an exceptionally safe plant, with no precautions, contraindications or herb drug interactions currently known. This freely available medicinal plant can therefore support a wide range of people, as well as health disorders, which makes it a must for any herbal dispensary. So, you might ask yourself, aside from chewing and spitting

up a poultice how else can ribwort be utilized? We can gather the leaves just prior to or at the start of flowering, and make a tincture or an infusion. We can add them to our leafy salads, or vegetable soups or add them to our culinary herb pestos. Or we can buy high quality liquid extracts through companies.

## Daily dosage:

Infusion: 2-4 gm

Tincture (1:5): 2-4 ml

Weekly dosage:

Fluid extract (1:2): 20-60 ml per week.

Remember too that there is medicine in sitting with a plant. Opening up your senses, your powers of intuition (another muscle that needs to be regularly exercised), and asking the plant for guidance, to share its wisdom, to honour you with its awareness and interaction. As we look, and smell, listen and touch, and then taste we build a deeper level of knowledge about this plant. By developing this greater awareness we will more easily remember the gifts it can share with us. Through our respect we can create more powerful medicine. This intimate exchange is a form of meditation which has multiple benefits for our bodies and our minds.

So shine bright fellow herbalists! ✨

## About the Author:

*Growing up I spent a lot of time in coastal and rural areas, developing an appreciation for Nature's beauty. At a young age I remember growing plants, and I had a strong desire to find a vocation that would help Earth and the animals that inhabited her. After many years searching, being distracted by a BA, overseas travel and a career in sales, I was led through divine intervention to the profession of*



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