Comfrey in the Garden

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Summary

Comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*) is a very hardy perennial herb adaptable to most conditions. Comfrey grows best in partial to full sun in moist, fertile soil. Comfrey is propagated by root cuttings or crown divisions. Comfrey can be planted throughout the growing season but establishes best when planted in the spring. Maintain moderate soil moisture, especially when plants are young. Once established, comfrey outcompetes weeds and does not have any reported insect or disease issues in Utah. Some leaves and roots are harvested after the first year of growth. It should be noted that consuming high doses or excessive long-term ingestion may cause liver toxicity, and those with known liver issues should consult a doctor before ingesting comfrey.

Varieties

The two well-known varieties are common comfrey (often called true comfrey) and Russian comfrey (or Bocking 14). Common comfrey has cream or purple flowers, while Russian comfrey features blue or violet flowers. Russian comfrey is the variety of comfrey generally found in local garden centers.

How to Grow

Soil: Comfrey is adaptable to most soil types but grows best in moist, fertile soil rich in organic matter, with a pH ranging from 6.0 to 7.0.

Soil Preparation: Before planting, determine fertilizer needs with a soil test and follow the recommendations given with the test report. Work the fertilizer into the top 6 inches of soil. If you fertilize with compost, apply no more than 1 inch of well-composted organic matter over the garden area fertilized.

Propagation: Comfrey rarely produces seeds, so propagate new plants from root cuttings, crown divisions, or transplants. Root cuttings are the cheapest and most common propagation method. Root cuttings will develop buds in about 3–6 weeks, while crown divisions will emerge 10 days after planting.

Planting and Spacing: Comfrey can be planted from April to September as long as the soil can be worked, but planting in spring is best. Root cuttings should be laid flat at 2–4 inches deep. Plant longer cuttings deeper than smaller cuttings. Crown divisions and transplants should be planted upright about 2 inches deep. Plant in a checkerboard arrangement with rows 2–3 feet apart. Closer spacing can result in higher yields.

Water: Comfrey is not prone to drought due to its taproot and deep root system but still prefers moderate soil moisture. Water when the top 2 inches of soil are noticeably dry. Young plants need more frequent water during the establishment period.

Fertilization: Comfrey needs adequate nitrogen, so ensure nitrogen levels in the soil are sufficient before planting. Comfrey requires regular nitrogen fertilization throughout the year. Use around 1–2 teaspoons (21-0-0) per square foot per month.

Problems

Weeds: After initial planting, control weeds by shallow cultivation, but avoid root damage that slows plant growth. After becoming established, comfrey outcompetes weeds due to its fast, dense growth. Remove weeds between rows throughout the growing season. Comfrey can become invasive if not contained or controlled. Herbicides are not generally used.

Insects/Diseases: In Utah, comfrey has no reported insect problems and is disease tolerant.

Harvest and Storage

Fresh: Both the leaves and the roots can be harvested. Wait to harvest until the second year after planting. Once established, harvest leaves every 2 weeks throughout the growing season. Gather a bunch of leaves and cut 2 inches above the ground. Dig and wash the roots, then chop them into smaller sections before drying. To harvest roots without killing the plant, use a shovel and harvest from one side of the root system. Comfrey is hardy and will typically survive root pruning during the growing season.

Drying: Freeze-drying is the quickest method to dry comfrey and maintain high quality. A common method to dry comfrey is to lay the leaves or roots in a dry, open area for at least 3 days. A dehydrator can be used to dry leaves and roots.

Overwintering: Comfrey is a perennial, so it will die back in the fall and grow back vigorously the following spring. Comfrey is very cold hardy (zone 4), so winter conditions rarely kill the root system.

Uses/Nutrition: Comfrey is used externally for poultices and compresses or internally as teas or eaten fresh. Externally, comfrey helps reduce swelling and bruising associated with sprains and broken bones as well as assists in healing wounds and burns. Ingesting comfrey can help treat bronchial problems and reduce internal inflammation. Comfrey provides a source of protein, calcium, potassium, phosphorus, and vitamin B12. It is important to note that comfrey contains toxic alkaloids that might cause lethal liver toxicity if repeatedly ingested or if taken at a high dose. Those with known liver problems should consult a doctor before ingesting comfrey. Comfrey can be used as an antifungal spray, fertilizer, or mulch due to its high content of potassium and nitrogen.

Additional Resources

Dunne, M. (2008). Controversial comfrey. *Health Freedom News*, *19*. https://thenhf.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Controversial-Comfrey.pdf

Teynor, T. M., Putnam, D. H., Doll, J. D., Kelling, K. A., Oelke, E. A., Undersander, D. J., & Oplinger, E. S. (n.d.). *Comfrey*. Alternative Field Crops Manual. https://hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/afcm/comfrey.html

WSU Clark County Extension PNW Plants. (n.d.). *Common comfrey* [Fact sheet]. Washington State University. http://pnwplants.wsu.edu/PlantDisplay.aspx?PlantID=522

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