Comfrey Book: Volume 2

Cultivation of Comfrey; Medicinal & Food Uses for People & Livestock

https://nantahala-farm.com/ComfreyBookVolume2--CultivationSymphytum-s.shtml

Chapter 37 (pages 430-433)

Harvesting Comfrey Leaves

For nutrition and harvest time, see sub-subsection 'Nutrition and Digestibility of Leaves/Stems and Maturity' in subsection 'Digestibility of Comfrey Leaf', in section 'Nutritional Value of Comfrey' (Chapter 19, Volume 1).

See sub-subsection 'Dry Small Amounts of Comfrey Leaf' in sub-section 'Comfrey as Hay' in section 'Comfrey Meal, Pellets, Hay and Silage' (Chapter 21).

See subsection 'Method of Digging Root Cuttings' in section 'Care of Comfrey Plant: Overview & How to Propagate' (Chapter 34).

See subsection 'Drying Comfrey Roots' in section 'Making and Using Comfrey Medicine' (Chapter 27).

Overview of Harvesting Leaves

"Your correspondent asks 'How often Prickly Comfrey can be mown':

'I do not think it can be mown. By far the most practical, as well as economical, mode of 'taking' its leaves is not to take the whole of them, as I did till 'within a few years past, but to **pluck the four or five most forward leaves from each crown.**

A tender hand will be better for a glove, but a hand ordinarily exposed will not need one.

The weight of each leaf will be some what more than an ounce (28 gram). By this method of treatment, the leaves that are left will be allowed to expand to their full size. When the whole crown was taken at once, it was reproduced in the short space of 10 or 12 days in the summer time, and in a fortnight (2 weeks) or a little more in late spring and autumn.

The leaves begin to show themselves in April. They may be plucked about the first week in May; and have lasted (this year and last year they did) to the end of October."

-'The Gardeners Chronicle and Agricultural Gazette for 1871' published in Covent Garden, WC, London, England, 1269 pages, January 7 to December 30 **1871**. Article: 'Notices to Correspondents', January 21 1871, pages 59-60.

"It has been noticed that the **Prickly Comfrey** plant thrives in all kinds of soil and aspect. **The leaves, as they reach maturity, are torn off without injury to the coming crop.** It is a hardy and free grower, the roots taking firm hold of the soil. After being once established they are difficult to eradicate, and **the leaves, which are most abundant, can be gathered from the beginning of May to the first frosts without injury to the plant.**"

-'The Southern Planter and Farmer, Devoted to Agriculture, Horticulture and Rural Affairs' by L.R. Dickinson, Richmond, Virginia, No. 1, January **1876**. Article: 'Symphytum Asperrimum' by C.E. Ashburner, Englishman in Henrico County, Virginia, page 55.

"It is advisable not to cut the leaves too low, say three inches (7.6 cm) up. The yield is largest if cut just before the flower opens. The plant likes clay, loam or any deep soil, and the roots will tap down eight feet (2.4 meter) to moisture.

The roots sometimes globe, and hold half-a-pint (1 cup = 236 ml) of gummy water.

When preserved in tanks (silage) or dried into hay, it is the richest fodder known.

It is estimated on a clay soil to produce from 60 to 120 tons an acre per annum (year), when the plants are established, and has been known to yield much above this."

-'Forage Plants and Their Economic Conservation by the New System of Ensilage: Part I: Caucasian Prickly Comfrey' by Thomas Christy, Jun., F.L.S. (Fellow of the Linnean Society), Christy & Co., London, England, **1877**, page 25.

'From 'Catalogue of Messrs. Suttons' of Reading, Berkshire, England in 1878:

'When the Comfrey leaves have grown from 18 to 24 inches (0.45 to 0.60 meter) high, they should be cut and given to the stock in a fresh green condition. In about six weeks, a second cutting will be ready and a succession of cuttings can be obtained through the summer and autumn.

As many as five heavy cuttings, each 20 tons per acre, or 100 tons per acre in one season, have been obtained by good management. If it is cultivated for one or two heavy cuttings, the stems should be allowed to grow to 4 or 5 feet (1.2 or 1.5 meter), and it may be cut with an ordinary hook, tied up in bundles and conveyed to the homestead as required. We recommend it especially for small occupations, as few crops can be more easily grown or prove so useful to those whose livestock consists of a horse. cow, and a few pigs."

-Russian Comfrey: A Hundred Tons an Acre of Stock or Compost for Farm, Garden or Smallholding by Lawrence D. Hills. London England: Faber and Faber, Limited, **1953**, page 33.

"All Comfrey cuts should be at two inches (5 cm) from the ground. The daily cut system is the most widely used but others are possible, so long as the plot is cut a minimum of five times a season. These cuts can be close together, especially in June, July and August. In October and November the growth slows, and it will be noticed that sun and warmth are of more importance to the yield than drought or wet."

-Russian Comfrey: A Hundred Tons an Acre of Stock or Compost for Farm, Garden or Smallholding by Lawrence D. Hills. London England: Faber and Faber, Limited, **1953**, page 65.

"Leaf and stem harvesting reduces a plant's ability to gather energy, and hence its ability to grow and compete. It may set a plant back in the successional marathon, allowing others to take the lead and direct the successional sequence. Intensive harvesting may spur growth of new or neighboring plants by giving them more sun or water or open up sites for weeds to establish. Some crops can respond to cutting quickly, barely skipping a beat. Such fast-recovering plants include mints (Mentha spp.), Comfreys (Symphytum spp.), and stinging nettle (Urtica dioica), for example."

-Edible Forest Gardens: Volume Two: Design & Practice by Dave Jacke and Eric Toensmeier. White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green, **2005**, page 439. (sp.= single species) (spp.= more than 1 species)

"As I sink my hands into mass after mass of fallen leaves, I am always happy to see creepy crawlies. **Despite many folks' odd** antipathy to spiders, the arachnids are in fact a very helpful generalist predator in the garden. Spiders will eat just about anything that moves, so they keep insect population explosions from getting out of hand.

But spiders hate bare soil, so they are often absent from conventional agricultural situations. Mulching is the best way to attract spiders to your garden, but having perennial plants around is also a good bet. Comfrey seems to be especially attractive, even more so if you let the winter-killed leaves lie on the ground rather than 'cleaning' them up.

One study* in Switzerland found 240 spiders for every square meter (10.7 square feet) of soil beneath Comfrey leaves." -'Spiders and Comfrey' by Anna Hess and Mark Hamilton, The Walden Effect, Virginia and Ohio, November 2009.

www.waldeneffect.org/blog/Spiders_and_comfrey/

(*'Uberwinterung von Arthropoden im Boden und an Ackerkrautern Kunstlich Angelegter Ackerkrautstreifen' {Overwintering of Arthropods in the Soil and on Field Weeds, Artificially Created Strips of Field Weed} by Hans-Martin Burki and Ariane Hausammann; Haupt, Bern Report, Agrarokologie, Band 7, 158 pages, 1993. In German.)

"Q: I was wondering when to stop harvesting my Comfrey for the season? It is mid September in zone 5b, and I have a lot of Comfrey to harvest but heard somewhere you should stop at a certain time to allow the plant to store up energy for the winter. I have about 60-90 days to first frost....will this be enough time if I harvest now?

A1: I usually stop now, not for the sake of the plants, but for the sake of the spiders. Hundreds of them can over-winter in the big Comfrey leaves.

A2: That's a good point! I always feel so bad when I see people doing the 'full fall cleanup' leaving nothing for the predators and prey to hang out in over the winter."

-"Comfrey: When to Stop Harvesting for Season' by Permies: Homesteading and Permaculture, All the Time; created by Paul Wheaton, Missoula, Montana, **2019**. https://permies.com/t/70587/Comfrey-stop-harvesting-season

(I have found spiders in my Comfrey plants in February when previous temperatures have been down to 12 degrees F {-11 C}. They get as close to the ground as they can under the debris so they don't freeze to death.)

Tools Used for Harvesting Comfrey Leaves

"Comfrey should be cut when it is about half-grown, as stock like it better then, and it springs up again quicker; besides, when cut at that time, four or five crops may be taken in one year. But if cut just before the flower-buds open, it should not be cut closer to the crown than two inches (5 cm). It is usual to reap Comfrey with a sickle, the crop from one root being as much as a man can get his arm round when set close. However, it may be mown with a strong scythe."

-'Transactions of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland, Fourth Series, Volume 14', Edinburgh, Scotland, **1882**. With the article: 'The Cultivation of Prickly Comfrey, and Its Use as a Fodder Plant' by David W. Wemyss, Newton Bank, St. Andrews, Fife Council, Scotland, pages 264-267.

(A sickle is a short-handled tool with a semicircular blade used for cutting grain or trimming plants. A scythe is a long-handled tool with a long, curving blade fastened at an angle to the handle. It is used to cut grass, grain, and weeds.)

"On a small scale, Comfrey cutting can be by scythe, hook, beet-topping knife, or motor scythe.

The usual procedure is for the pigman to take out a slit-open bag or two stitched together, and drag them after him, cutting until he has enough to carry away on his shoulders; the same applies to poultry.

Shears can be used, cutting two inches (5 cm) from ground level; or a sickle (bagging-hook, reaping-hook), or on a larger scale, the type of motor scythe used for cutting rough grass in orchards.

Gathering is a matter of a garden fork and a barrow (wheel barrow)."

-Russian Comfrey: A Hundred Tons an Acre of Stock or Compost for Farm, Garden or Smallholding by Lawrence D. Hills. London England: Faber and Faber, Limited, **1953**, pages 64, 118.

(A scythe is a tool with a long, curving blade fastened at an angle to a handle used to cut grass, grain, etc., by hand.)

(A beet-topping knife has a wide blade with hook on the end. It is used to harvest sugar beets and chop off the leaves.) (Motor Scythe is a mower with a short reciprocating knife attached to a garden tractor mechanism.)

"Comfrey can be cut at soil level, and this makes cutting very efficient. **1,200 to 2,000 kg (2645 to 4409 pounds) of Comfrey leaf** were cut by hand in an hour. It is possible to cut in the rain, because water scarcely adheres to the leaf and stem." -Comfrey Report No. 3: Feeding Dairy Cattle in Japan' by Meiji Milk Producing Co., Tokyo, Japan for Henry Doubleday Research Association, Braintree, Essex, England, 31 pages, July **1964**, page 13.

"Comfrey leaves were harvested by hand with a hedge clipper. Harvesting continued from April 26 until November 16. Early in the season harvesting interval was 10 to 20 days, but from August on yields dropped and harvesting intervals became longer." -'Plant Leaf Protein with Emphasis on Comfrey' by Hubert Heitman and Milton D. Miller with Edward Johnson (agronomic phases of study), Sergio E. Gyarzun of University of Chile (swine digestion trial), Bob D. Wilson (rat study) and James T. Elings (Extension Animal Scientist); California Experiment Station and Agricultural Extension Service, University of California, **1969**.

"In late summer or early fall two gardeners approach the Comfrey bed with a wheelbarrow and two pairs of long-bladed shears. They begin cutting down the plants with their shears. They slide the open blades of the shears around the base of each plant, then lift the shears up off the soil a few inches (2 inch = 5 cm) and snip the blades shut, so that every leaf falls away, and the crown of the plant is left with a clump of short stems sticking out of it.

The cutting goes very quickly, even though the gardeners stop every minute or so to pick up all the leaves they've cut, and put them into the wheelbarrow."

-Enchanted Garden: Alan Chadwick's Organic Method of Gardening by Tom Cuthbertson. London, England: Rider & Company / Hutchinson & Co. Publishers Ltd, **1978**, page 134.

"Medvedev and Sidorova (1976) found that in both S. asperum and S. x uplandicum the yield was strongly influenced by the cutting regime (system) in the previous year.

Yields were 30-35% greater from plots cut only once in the previous year than from plots cut three times.

A similar effect on S. x uplandicum yield was noted by Chubarova, Vorob'ev and Rybinkova (1970)." -'Comfrey Symphytum spp. as a Forage Crop' by J.C. Forbes, A.D. McKelvie, and P.J.C. Saunders, North of Scotland College of Agriculture, Aberdeen, United Kingdom; Herbage Abstracts, Volume 49, No. 12, pages 523-539, **1979**.

"The best form of harvest is to cut Comfrey leaf at 6 inches (15 cm) from the ground with a side-bar cutter, attempting not to bruise the leaf as this darkens the final color of the dried leaf. Some can use a flail-chop if the end use is for cattle. The Comfrey is laid out in wide windrows (a row of cut crop raked together to dry), avoiding leaf stacking and compaction. Let the leaf come to a 50 percent sun-cure, and then pick it up using a draper (conveyor pick-up) or other conveyor-type delivery to wagons. The wagons should be taken to large dehydration facilities for final drying. These facilities can be hop kilns, tobacco dryers, and plywood kilns. Grain dryers are too small. Basically, forced warm air shafts work best.

Once the Comfrey leaf is dried, it is usually put into 180-pound (81.6 kg) rectangular bales, wrapped in burlap (much like hops). Since it is quite light, the 'cube' is bulky, so dimension of the bale are designed for stacking in a warehouse.

Comfrey root harvests can be done with potato digging equipment."

-'Comfrey Leaf: A New Animal Food Supplement' in 'The Encyclopedia of Alternative Agriculture' ebook by Dr. Richard Alan Miller, https://richardalanmiller.com, Agricultural Consultant and Researcher, Oregon and Washington, **1992**.

(A flail chopper cuts/shreds leaves and stalks into small pieces so it can be fed to livestock or used as mulch.)

(Potato digger is a machine that digs up potatoes, removes tops/dirt from tubers, then throws tubers on top of the field.)

"Harvesting Comfrey: For years I happily harvested a bed of around 24 Comfrey plants using ordinary garden shears until I discovered the long-handled horizontal bladed shears. They save a lot of bending or kneeling when harvesting. For larger patches, a scythe or sickle will pay for itself in time saving."

-'Planting, Cultivating, Harvesting and Problems of Comfrey' by John Harrison, Allotment and Gardens: Grow Your Own - Allotment - Gardening Help, https://www.allotment-garden.org, Penygroes, Gwynedd, Wales, **2018**.

"EA: Thought I'd share how I'm stacking a fair bit of function in the later summer harvest of our **Comfrey rhizome barrier** between our gardens and the neighbors lawn. Lots of layers of yield coming from this, it's such an exciting plant to work with!

R: Just a note that with a European scythe with a ditch blade, you could slash all of that Comfrey easily, without having to bend down or exert much effort at all. I mention the ditch blade explicitly because it's meant to handle even smaller woody plants and weeds rather than just trimming fine grasses (many blades are thinner and more fragile, meant only to mow lawn). I mention European explicitly because it's a much lighter scythe, and the American scythe is extremely heavy and doesn't work with your body to make cutting easy.

EA: I use a scythe quite a bit and often to harvest Comfrey. The problem is that in this scenario there is material standing tall and a fair amount laying flat. *I wanted to get it really cleanly cut this time so the hori was the perfect tool for me in this particular case.* But yeah, the Euroopean scythe is a wonderful tool!"

-'Comfrey:Leaf Harvest and Stacking Function' by Edible Acres, August **2018**, Finger Lakes area, New York, from Reddit Permaculture. https://www.reddit.com/r/Permaculture/comments/9c2vho/comfrey_leaf_harvest_and_stacking_function/ www.edibleacres.org

(A hori or hori-hori is also called a 'soil knife', 'weeding knife' or 'leisure knife'. It is a heavy serrated multi-purpose steel blade for garden digging or cutting. The blade is sharp on both sides and comes to a somewhat sharp point at the end. Hori means 'to dig' in Japanese.)

"The Japanese Kama - 'Mow where your scythe can't go!' I actually prefer to use a Japanese kama for harvesting certain grains, over the European sickle. The short, comparatively straight blade of the kama, is much easier to control, in my opinion, than the western, hook-shaped sickles. Harvest grains or tall grass by grabbing a handful of stems and then cut a safe distance underneath with a pull stroke. It can also be used as a grass sickle and cut with a forward slicing motion, like a scythe blade.

Long-Handled Japanese Kama: This super-sharp Japanese kama has a 41 inch (104 cm) long oak handle. The laminated blade is 8.5 inches (21.6 cm) long and 2 inches (5 cm) wide. It is great for reaching down into tight spots and hooking and cutting weeds, larger stemmed grasses, and brambles. I use it for managing a native prairie planting on a very steep slope. Unlike the kama above, the tang of the blade is angled to make mowing while upright a little easier. **It cuts Comfrey like it isn't even there.** I do not recommend it for any plant woodier than blackberry brambles."

- 'Sickles' by One Scythe Revolution, Winona, Minnesota, (February 2022). The Japanese Kama and European sickles. https://onescytherevolution.com/sickles.html