

~ Ask Granny Earth ~

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Lady's Slipper

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I've been looking for pink Lady's Slipper in the woods around here. What do you know about it? Does it have any medicinal qualities?

Well all I can tell you is to keep looking for it, because according to Traffic International (the world's largest wild life monitoring program) Lady's Slipper is at risk in the wild, and is currently on the endangered species list. That being said, I can at least tell you where to look for it. But if I were you, I'd look up the "endangered species" rules and regulations before digging, least you get into trouble with the endangered species authorities (who ever they might be).

Lady's Slipper (*Cypripedium reginae*): Cypripedium is Greek for "Venus's Slipper", and there are approximately 300 varieties to this species, which is from the orchidaceae (orchid) family. The American Indians called Lady's Slipper, Moccasin Flower, because its flower definitely resembles a moccasin or a slipper, as you can see in the picture.

The Lady's Slipper flower is usually yellow and white, or pink/purple and white, and are hermaphrodite (have both male and female organs). They need to be pollinated by insects, and they bloom anytime between May and July. The flower, which is 2 –3 inches long, is short-lived, and rarely lasts more than a day or two. The plant itself can grow anywhere from 6 to 24 inches tall. This plant is native to North America, and its natural habitat is deep in the forest, away from the dangers of humans. It can (sometimes) be found growing in the medium, loamy soil of our cool, damp, acid woods, usually along stream-beds or bogs. This kind of atmosphere reminds me to look for it where Golden Seal, Trillium and Black Cohosh might be growing, as it seems to like the same conditions; stream and creek banks beneath filtered sunlight.

Lady's Slipper is a perennial, which grows from New England to Georgia, and from the East coast as far West as New Mexico, spreading by root division in the spring. Its continued growth (in the wild) is threatened by plant collectors, even though it can seldom be successfully transplanted.

This delicate herb is best propagated professionally by seed, sown under sterile laboratory conditions. Due to the roots being gathered for medicinal purposes, Lady's Slipper is very near extinction in the wild. Perhaps that's why it has lost its popularity over the years to Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*), Skullcap (*Scutellaria lateriflora*) and Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*), which all have similar medicinal properties, and are readily available.

Lady's Slipper has often been referred to as 'American Valerian', having many of the latter's medicinal qualities: sedative, hypnotic, anti-spasmodic, hypotensive, carminative, and nervine. Only the root was used medicinally, hence its nickname 'Nerve Root'. In days past, when it was growing abundantly in this area, Nerve Root had a high reputation for its sedative and relaxing effect on the nervous system.

Our Native American ancestors used it as a sedative and antispasmodic to ease menstrual and labor pains, and to counter insomnia and nervous tension. The root is antispasmodic, diaphoretic, hypnotic, sedative, analgesic, and a nervine tonic. The active ingredients are not water soluble, and so the root was taken in the form of a tincture.

Lady's Slipper is said to be the equivalent to Valerian Root in its effect as a nerve relaxant, but according to my research, its restorative effects appear to elicit a more positive, gentle reaction than that of Valerian Root. Being an effective tranquilizer, it reduces emotional tension, and calms the mind. It was listed in the U.S. Pharmacopoeia from 1863 to 1916 as a treatment for anxiety, palpitations, headaches, muscular tension, panic attacks and neurotic conditions in general. The only draw-back that Lady's Slipper would have (for me), is that it exudes a similar odor as that of Valerian Root, which if you have ever encountered, I dare say you'll not forget easily.

If Lady's Slipper could still be found growing abundantly in the wild, and was not threatened with extinction, one would gather the roots in the fall of the year, and dry them for latter use in infusions and tinctures. It is my belief that the reason for its near extinction is that it was such a good medicinal herb that it was over gathered by country folk who knew how great it was for treating their own problems naturally.

I believe we need to remember this when gathering other great herbs, such as Golden Seal and Ginseng - always leave enough for future, natural propagation. Or, better still - start our own crop, and leave the natural supply alone so that it too doesn't become (near) extinct like Lady's Slipper.