

~ Ask Granny Earth ~

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Mullein

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As I drive along most any road these days, I see a most curious plant growing in the banks. It's tall with big long leaves and has a spike growing up the middle. This spike has little yellow flowers on it. Do you know what this plant is?

Yes, you have discovered *Verbascum thapsus*, better known as Mullein! It's one of my favorite herbs. Once you come to know Mullein, you shall never forget it. Perhaps you'll grow to love its soft leaves and tiny golden flowers as much as I do.

Many years ago (before I became acquainted with Mullein) I found this most unusual plant growing in my garden. I knew that I had not planted it, but there it was, low to the ground with its furry leaves. It was so unusual looking that I didn't dare pull it out. One day while visiting a new friend's herb garden, I noticed this same plant growing there. She explained that its name was Mullein and that it just shows up wherever it wants to. I

immediately began doing research on this weed and I will share what I learned with you.

Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*): Mullein is a biennial plant- it shows up in your garden one year and grows considerably, dying off in the fall. The following spring it really takes off producing its tall spike with lots of small, bright yellow flowers. I've seen this spike reach heights of 6 or 7 feet but it can range anywhere from 1 or 2 feet upward. I've found the best Mullein patches growing in very poor soil, or in old abandoned parking lots among stones and asphalt. Most often you'll see only one or two plants at a time. If you find a whole patch of it, you'll feel like you struck gold!

Mullein's common names: Aaron's Rod, Jacob's Staff, Torch-weed and Velvet Plant. As you can see these common names all refer either to the spike, and flowers or the soft furry leaves of Mullein. The name 'Torch-weed' was derived from the time of Ulysses who is said to have used it for a torch as a protection from evil spirits. Mullein's rigid stem, when soaked in oil can be lit for such a purpose, if you're so inclined.

If you're lucky enough to find a Mullein plant growing in your garden, wait until the second year to harvest it. I would personally not pick the leaves until you have harvested the flowers in mid summer. The flowers bloom only a few at a time, so you'll have to check your plant every day and only pick the flowers that are out.

Make sure to have a small jar ready with olive oil in it. As you pick each flower, drop it into the oil. The taller the spike, the more flowers you'll get. I would use about ½ cup olive oil for flowers of a six foot spike.

After you've gathered all the flowers, shake the jar to make sure they're immersed in the oil and then add a clove or two of chopped garlic. Sit the jar on a windowsill in sunlight, shaking it every so often. I recommend leaving it there for at least one full moon phase. Then, strain off the oil from the flowers and garlic chips- and you have a wonderful remedy for earaches, and hemorrhoids as well. I remember the first time I convinced my grandson's mother to try this remedy instead of antibiotics for his earache. She was truly amazed at the healing power of this wonderful plant!

But that's only half the story; for a fabulous cough remedy harvest the leaves. As with any herb, hang them to dry in a shady, warm area. When they're dry, they make one of the best cough remedies Nature has to offer. The Indians would smoke the dried leaves as a treatment for lung problems. Mullein contains properties that are both emollient and mucilage, having strong antibacterial actions as well. It will not only reduce mucous but also aid in the expectoration of phlegm. Some of its other constituents are- flavonoids, triterpenoid saponins, volatile oil and tannins. These phytochemicals all work together to make Mullein an excellent all round wound healer.

Do not use the seeds. If you leave the flowers on the spike, it will form a seedpod. You can save these seeds for next year. **Do not** use them in medicinal teas and here is why; It's said that the Indians would use the seeds to catch fish. They'd scatter them on top of the water of a still pond. In a few minutes the fish would float to the top; they had been temporarily 'stunned' into a coma-like state. The Indians would then just reach down and pick them from the water. The seeds have strong narcotic properties.

I once told a friend to make Mullein tea for her husband who suffered from chronic bronchitis. She replied, "Oh, I've been making it for him. The neighbors brought some the other day." When I asked her if it was helping him she said, "It does seem to be helping, but after he drinks it, he almost passes out and his speech is slurred." Turns out she was boiling the entire plant, seedpods and all! Just because herbs are natural, doesn't mean they're harmless. Check with a reputable herbalist or better still, do your own research.