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The comforts of comfrey

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Comfrey is pictured growing in companionship with a pattypan squash. Of 20 squash plants, this one yielded the best and grew most expansively. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

Comfrey is one of permaculture's most famous function-stacking plants. It's so easy to raise, propagate and share that there's no reason to omit it from your garden, where you'll never run out of uses for it. Fall is a good time to plant it for spring use.

Unless you want your plots to become a comfrey farm, make sure you're growing a sterile cultivar. Running comfrees produce viable seeds and quickly overtake available land. A plant breeder in the United Kingdom developed a seed-sterile strain from which he could clone. (Like grocery bananas, these comfrees are genetic copies.) Bocking 4 and Bocking 14, named after the region in Essex, sprout readily from root pieces.

A story makes clear just how vigorously they sprout from root bits. A local farm planted comfrey for compost enrichment, and uprooted some plants to chop into the pile. That compost never heated up to the 140 degrees that would sterilize weed seeds and comfrey root pieces. The compost was finished, cured, and spread throughout the beds — and only then did the pieces activate, each producing a new comfrey plant wherever it landed.

By the time the farmer noticed, the new plants had rooted. Excavating them invariably left intact root fragments, which sprouted further. Bocking 14 and 4 cannot be evicted once established. Much of the farm's land was smothered by comfrey, and it was from this Bocking 14 plantation that I brought several plants to Harstine Island to use and share with due care.

A further note to that end: though comfrey has been used as a vegetable, tea and medicine for two millennia, the FDA banned oral preparations containing comfrey after studies emerged showing that it causes liver toxicity. As such, we should confine our explorations to external and garden uses.

A Harstine farmer I told about my comfrey shared that comfrey helped him at an unlikely time. In February there is no aerial growth, only a dormant root. So when he burned himself with a dollop of molten plastic, he dug up a piece of root and made a plaster with it. He explained that allantoin, which stimulates cell growth and heals wounds and broken bones, concentrates in the roots over winter. The quarter-sized burn healed quickly without scarring.

One Harstine homesteader reports that comfrey has been effective for heating up his compost, hosting bees, spiders and ladybugs, and feeding his chickens. Other animals that enjoy it as fodder include pigs and cattle. Parasitoid wasps also associate with comfrey and hunt garden pests like cabbageworm and aphids.

I use it to make liquid manure, for which it can be cut three to four times a year. This tea is rich in phosphorus and potassium, particularly beneficial to fruiting plants like tomatoes, cucumbers and peppers. Even naysayers admit that comfrey contains significant calcium, which our bioregion's soils always need.

For this stinky tea, 2 1/2 pounds of comfrey should be steeped in 2 1/2 gallons of water for 10 days. Per Eric Fisher's "Compost Teas for the Organic Grower," this should be diluted 7:1 for foliar application, or used neat as a root feed via a sunken container. I give liberal lashings of it to everything in my gardens and orchards throughout the season.

Comfrey makes a fantastic fertilizer mulch. The University of Minnesota calculated its total NPK (immediate and delayed availability) at 3.7-1.21-8.4. It also contains necessary trace minerals such as boron, calcium and copper. Permaculturists often deploy it via the "chop and drop" method, which works exactly how it sounds.

The leaves provide an abundant source of biomass. Bulgaria's Balkan Ecology Project states that they've harvested up to 6 pounds per plant, per cutting (at two to six times per year). This organic matter helps enrich our thinning topsoils. Not bad for a plant that I misplaced a piece of on a path, which then appeared a year later.

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