

What Most People Don't Know About Wild Lettuce

Finding safe, effective painkillers and sedatives can be a complicated task.

When it comes to finding plants that can achieve these goals, you will find that many are either very dangerous when handled incorrectly, or they are not legal to own, use, or grow. At the current time, wild lettuce is one of the few plants that can be used for these purposes, and is still legal to own, grow, and use in the United States.

Before you consider using this, or any other herb for pain management, do not forget to thoroughly investigate any “cradle to grave” drugs or herbs you are already taking. This includes consulting with a pain management specialist and other specialists for each condition that you have. Depending on the situation, the pain you are trying to control may be related to a side effect from another drug, or it may be a sign of drug dependence. Once you eliminate these factors, you will have a much better chance of using wild lettuce for treating physical pain as opposed to masking another problem that needs to be resolved.



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It is also very important to consult a licensed herbalist so that you can avoid drug/herb interactions. Unfortunately, most doctors are not properly educated in the use of nutrition and herbal supplements for wellness and managing diseases. On the

other side of the equation, simply trying to take guesses on your own can also cause a host of problems. This includes winding up with unwanted side effects, and causing hidden damage to vital organs such as the kidneys and liver.

An herbalist that has studied herbal medicine as practiced in a broader range of cultures might know more about wild lettuce and drug/other herb interactions.

What is Wild Lettuce?

Wild Lettuce, or *Lactuca Virosa* looks a bit like dandelion, and has elongated, serrated leaves. It can reach 7 feet tall, and grows in many parts of the world. Here in the United States, it has been introduced mainly in Alabama, California, and Iowa. You may also find this biennial growing wild in other parts of the country. Usually, wild lettuce does best in full sunlight, so if it is growing wild in your area, look for sunny meadows or other places where it will not be overly shaded.

What We Do and Don't Know About Wild Lettuce

If you do some research, you are sure to find a wealth of articles in scientific journals about herbs such as turmeric, ginger, marigolds, and ginseng. Unfortunately, there is far less modern research available on wild lettuce. At most, you will find skeptical entries in different articles that say it was used historically for certain purposes, however the actual usefulness of the herb is questionable.

As a case in point, from Roman times and early in the history of the UK, wild lettuce was an ingredient used in several recipes dedicated to anesthesia. While articles on this topic in scientific journals say that it does have some mild

sedative properties, they go on just as quickly to say that it probably has no value in this context. The last time I checked, a scientific study is designed to answer a question as definitively as possible. From that perspective, research either shows that the plant has sedative properties, or it shows that it doesn't.

The lack of clarity begs many questions, and makes it difficult to use a scientific basis for discussing this herb. This includes assessing whether or not wild lettuce may or may not have dangerous interactions with other drugs, and if it has dangerous side effects. For example, there are no studies available to indicate whether molecules wild lettuce blocks the hERG potassium channel in heart cells. While you may not realize it, many drugs that would be very useful never make it onto the market because they block the hERG potassium channel and can deadly irregular heart rhythms as a result[1].



Since there is very little modern research information available, this article will focus mainly on stories of how the herb was used in the past. It is up to you, the reader, to decide if you want to ask a licensed herbalist about using wild lettuce. If you do decide to use this herb, it is also important to be aware of the fact that life threatening problems can occur if you mix it with other drugs or other herbs. While doctors and pharmacists may know very little, if anything at this time, you should, at least

consider contacting poison control if you do have a bad reaction to wild lettuce alone, or in combination with other drugs. At the very least, if enough reports are generated, it may trigger the release of a warning about this herb, and any

necessary studies to find out which circumstances may put lives in danger. As with other herbs and drugs that cannot be safely mixed together, or used at certain doses, it is better to know beforehand so you can avoid the problem as opposed to become a victim of it.

Ways to Use Wild Lettuce

Insofar as medicinal properties, Wild Lettuce has a documented use in Europe since the 1800s for pain management[2]. Some other historical uses include:

- As a diuretic
- Treating snake and scorpion bites. Wild lettuce can be taken internally as well as fashioned into a poultice.
- Sedation – interestingly enough, there are several recipes from Rome and the UK in the Middle Ages[3] that used Wild Lettuce as an anesthesia. Even though modern studies supposedly showed the latex derived from wild lettuce does not have stable enough molecules to act as an effective sedative, similar recipes may have arisen independently in many different cultures. It would not surprise me if the situation here is similar to that of several herbs used in Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine in the sense that the preparation and other ingredients in the recipe play a role in whether or not the herb actually works in the body.
- As a laxative
- Managing coughs related to asthma, whooping cough, and colds.

Lactuca Virosa vs Lactuca Serriola

When you hear the word “mint”, you may be wondering if the person means peppermint, spearmint, pineapple mint, chocolate mint, or some other plant that is found in the mint family. Even though all these plants are related, they have different

tastes, and are also likely to have different medicinal properties. Insofar wild lettuce, you will find at least two plants that look different and also have some different properties. Unfortunately, there may also be other plants that were referred to as wild lettuce in the past, however it is now impossible to find them, let alone figure out which ones were being referred to. That being said, if you are determined to buy or grow wild lettuce, you should know a little bit more about *Lactuca Serriola*, since it may well be the plant being used in any given blend or recipe. At the very least, when you know what it does, you may not be as surprised if you get some unexpected results.

One of the biggest differences between *L.virosa* and *L.serriola* is the latter has a documented history of being used as an aphrodisiac. In fact, this particular use for *L.serriola* dates back to ancient Egypt[4]. *L.serriola* can also be used as a pain killer and sedative in doses lower than what you would use for an aphrodisiac. Unfortunately, there is no modern research available to explain why *L. Serriola* works as a relaxant or sedative at lower doses, yet has the opposite effect at higher ones.

How to Grow Wild Lettuce

Even though wild lettuce is related to the kind of lettuce you would use in a salad, it is a bit different in terms of how to grow it. Among other things, wild lettuce can tolerate warmer weather and will thrive in the summer months. If you are going to grow wild lettuce indoors, plan on using a fairly large tub as the plant will get very tall and need a lot of nutrients during its life cycle.

Here are some other things you should consider when growing wild lettuce:

- While this plant does best in full sunlight, it will also tolerate some shade. When growing indoors, it is

likely you will need to use supplemental lighting. If the plants are not doing well with full spectrum bulbs, you may want to try a reptile warming bulb, as it will provide UV light that the plant cannot get through glass, plastic, or other clear window panes.

- Most species of lettuce are notorious for doing well in both aquaponic and hydroponic systems. Therefore, if you are interested in experimenting with this growing method, wild lettuce might be a good plant to start with. Just remember that any time you use larger amounts of water, there is an increased risk of bacterial overgrowth.
- Since wild lettuce can get quite tall, it is likely you will have to repot it from time to time in order to make sure the plant has proper nutrients. Make sure that you know how to handle larger plants during the transplant process so that you do not damage the roots, stems, and leaves.

Where to Learn More About Wild Lettuce

If you are interested in herbal remedies, then it may be a good idea to start looking at older texts from cultures that used these herbs long before modern drugs were invented. While the syntax of the books may be different from what we use today, you can and should be able to adapt to it and obtain the information you need. If you are unsure of an interpretation, or something doesn't make sense, you can ask an herbalist or a linguistic expert that is familiar with the language/dialect the original book was written in.



From there, you will also need to take some extra steps to make sure you know exactly which species of plant the text is talking about. As a reminder, just keep some different variations of mint or basil around to remind you of just how different related plants can be. At the chemical level, those differences in odor, taste, texture, and growth patterns are all caused by the plant making different molecules. Never forget that even a slight change can eliminate a molecule that you are looking for to manage a medical condition, or it can create a molecule that is dangerous or lethal. No matter how sure you may be of any given translation, take the time to make sure you have the right plant and the right instructions. Sadly, there are more than a few plants listed in older texts that we no longer have available, or simply don't know what the reference is referring to. With regard to wild lettuce, it is entirely possible that more than a few species of this plant were referred to by the same name, and may not even be available at this time.

Here are some old world herbal and medical references available for free online. They will give you information on wild lettuce and other herbs that were used in various cultures. At the very least, you might enjoy browsing through them and comparing them to more modern information.

- Historia Naturali[5]
- Hildegard's Healing Plants[6]
- Culpeper's Complete Herbal[7]
- Materia Medica
- King's American Dispensatory[8]
- Compendium of Medicine[9]
- Avicenna's Canon of Medicine[10]

Today, millions of people struggle with intractable pain and are being told that they must stop taking opiates because they are addictive. When someone has been in a bad accident, is in pain from a disease like cancer, or has some other painful condition, it is very hard to accept that drug addiction may be yet another cross to bear. While there may be more than a few people that are addicted to pain killers, the fact remains trying to control opiates with laws is no different than gun grabber policies. At the end of the day, innocent people that need pain killers to manage physical pain are the ones that are going to suffer because of the actions of others.

From the perspective of modern scientific research, the capacity of wild lettuce to manage pain is controversial at best. On the other side of the equation, before opiates were introduced, wild lettuce was used, and very successfully around the world for treating pain. Therefore, if you do have pain related issues, this may be a useful herb to try. Unlike other herbs, you may need to exercise some additional cautions, especially if you use over the counter or prescription drugs for other conditions. In addition, it is always best to be wary of manufactured products because you never really know what it is in each pill. Your best option is, and will always be to grow and prepare your own herbs, or at least make sure you obtain leaves from plants that you have a chance to see for yourself.



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Resources

[1] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19442204>

[2] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3031874/>

[3] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1127089/>

[4] <http://www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2005/06/29/1403295.htm>

[5] http://www.attalus.org/info/pliny_hn.html

[6] <http://www.freepdf.info/index.php?post/De-Bingen-Hildegard-e-Hildegard-s-healing-plants>

[7] <https://archive.org/details/cu31924001353279/page/n8>

[8]

<https://archive.org/details/kingsamericandis02kinguoft/page/n6>

[9]

https://archive.org/stream/gilbertusanglicu00hand/gilbertusanglicu00hand_djvu.txt

[10]

https://archive.org/stream/AvicennasCanonOfMedicine/9670940-Canon-of-Medicine_djvu.txt