

# MULLEIN





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## Introduction

Mullein is an herb known for its numerous health benefits, particularly for the lungs. Originally from Europe, Mullein is an easy-to-identify biennial plant that grows abundantly across North America. Some traditional uses include treating dry coughs, bronchial irritation, and even diaper rash! There are different preparation methods for the leaves, such as making tea and tinctures, while the flowers, due to their soothing properties, are usually made into an oil for inflamed skin and ear infections. Mullein has a rich history of use with a variety of applications!



## Identification

Mullein is very easy to identify! Mullein is a biennial plant, which means that it has a two-year life cycle. During the first year, it lays down its roots and foundation with a small basal rosette set of leaves and then it shoots up a big spike in the second year that produces the flowering head. The flowers come sporadically and not all at once. The leaves are an elliptical oval and are very fuzzy.

## Mullein: A “People Plant”

Where does mullein grow? Well, it grows everywhere! We see it all over North America. It's an abundant plant that pops up in our gardens and in disturbed soil. Usually, you don't even need to plant it because the seeds spread out all over. One would think this were native to North America by its widespread reach but it was actually brought from Europe!



Since it loves disturbed soils, which we create regularly, this qualifies mullein a type of a “people plant.”

The expression “people plant” is used to describe plants that “follow” people wherever they go. Another “people plant” is plantain, which was called “white man’s footprint” by indigenous tribes in North America. Mullein is a classic case of such “people plants.”

## **Folk Herbalism: Energetics and the Doctrine of Signatures**

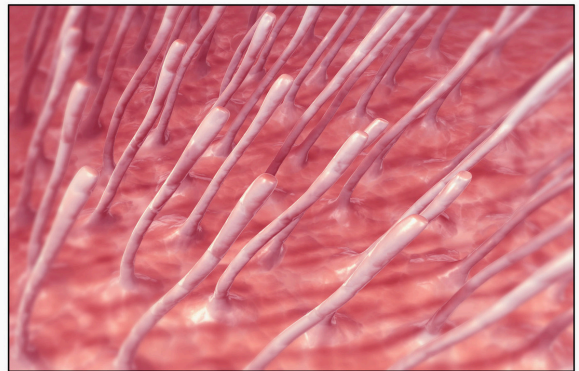
Folk herbalists throughout the world have employed different means to describe the actions of herbs.

One way is to describe the “energetics” of the plant (usually by taste) as pairs of opposites (hot/cold and wet/dry are the most common.) Mullein is considered a moistening and cooling herb for hot and dry conditions, especially in the respiratory tract.

Another way herbalists have identified herbal properties is called the “Doctrine of Signatures.” This principle states that the physical appearance and growing environment of the plant provides clues of possible use. To that end, mullein usually grows in hot, dry, and arid places, pointing to its energetics. Noted herbalist Matthew Wood has described mullein’s fuzzy leaves as having “hair-like” protrusions that resemble the cilia in the lining of the mucous membranes of the lungs – pointing to their use to restore the cilia.

For these, and many other reasons, mullein’s “claim to fame” is working with dry, inflamed, and irritated bronchial passages. Mullein was historically used by people who smoked too much or those who had dry, irritated throats.

Normal Cilia



Diseased Cilia







### **Historical Uses: Mullein as a “Protection Plant”**

There are definitely a few interesting ways mullein was used in history. Mullein had a lot of uses against “evil wind” and protection from “evil spiritual influence.” In other words, mullein was viewed as a “protective plant.” This was before modern scientific discoveries developed language to describe microbes. During this time period, infections were considered “evil spirits.” In colonial times, European settlers would string mullein all around their arms and down their legs to protect themselves from these “evil spiritual influences” that were causing their illnesses.

Mullein is mentioned throughout literature from the oldest European herbalists dating back to Hippocrates (of “Hippocratic Oath” fame), Galen, and the famed renaissance-era herbalist Nicholas Culpepper.

**NOTE:** Mullein is also very flammable and the stalk has been used as a candle or a torch! The stalk can be dipped in some kind of oil and turned into a torch, if needed.



## Mullein Leaf: Uses and Preparations

First, let's examine the many uses and preparations of the leaves.

**Tea** – The most common preparation of mullein leaf is as a tea. If you're harvesting mullein, the easiest way is to cut/rip the leaf mid rib since the rib takes longer to dry. After the leaves are dry, you can crumble them and/or rub them through screens to get small pieces (like a tea cut size.)

Mullein helps move lung catarrhal out of the body to help clear the mucous membranes. Mullein tea has been used historically for tuberculosis, bronchitis, and deep lung congestion as both an analgesic and antimicrobial for the lungs. In addition, the tea is believed to reduce spasms in the lung tissue as well as thin mucus to get clearer mucus flowing in the body when it's dried up and hacky.

**NOTE:** Make sure to strain your mullein leaf tea properly! Those "little hairs" on the leaves can be quite irritating to the throat if the tea isn't properly strained.



**Smoke Blends** – Believe it or not, this plant can be smoked (and has been smoked for ages.) In North America, the indigenous people classically smoked mullein after they had smoked too much kinnikinnick (bearberry). Mullein smoke was inhaled to help soothe the lungs and was included as part of smoke blends with other demulcent (emollient) herbs like coltsfoot.





**Steam Inhalation** – A steam inhalation is an old technique to get the properties of an herb deep into the respiratory tract. In this case, a steam inhalation with mullein would help drive its demulcent (soothing) actions deep into the lungs. The process to set up a steam inhalation is simple: you put herbs into hot, steamy water and then make a “blanket tent” over the pot (or bowl) and breathe in deeply. Other herbs that make great steam inhalations are eucalyptus, thyme, coltsfoot, peppermint, rosemary, and oregano.



**Eucalyptus steam inhalation**

**Poultice** – One of the earliest external applications of herbs was in the form of a “spit” poultice. A “spit” poultice is simply chewing, or macerating, the herb and then applying it to the affected area. Due to the soothing and analgesic (anti-spasmodic) nature of mullein, these leaves have been applied externally for broken bones (especially ribs and sternums), soft tissue injuries, and hot rashes. The most famed plant for “spit poultices” is plantain (*Plantago* sp.,) a “drawing” and soothing herb.



**Preparing a plantain poultice**

**Compress** – Another common external application of the leaves is as a compress. For the purposes of this e-booklet, a compress is defined as a cloth/towel soaked into a strong infusion (usually a water-based or vinegar infusion) and applied externally. For example, mullein leaves were soaked in hot water and a little bit of vinegar and then used as a compress on hemorrhoids or any kind of irritated skin. Its traditional use as an anti-spasmodic for the lungs gave rise to its external application as an anti-spasmodic agent and analgesic (pain reducer) for muscular and nervous system injuries.





## Mullein Flowers: Uses and Preparations

Next, let's examine the many uses and preparations of the flowers.

Since the flowers come so sporadically, you will need to go back every couple of days and harvest them (unless you have a large mullein patch.) The most common preparation of the flowers is as an oil infusion.



### Making Mullein Flower Oil

To make an infused oil from mullein flowers, you will only need three things: fresh flowers, your preferred oil, and a jar (glass is best.) After harvesting the flowers, wilt them for a day to reduce the risk of spoilage. Put the wilted flowers in a glass jar and cover them completely in oil, making sure that the flowers are completely submerged. Olive, sunflower, grape seed, and avocado oils are preferred for herbal infusions. Allow the flowers to infuse for 2-3 weeks before straining. Let the strained oil sit for a couple of days. If you notice any water at the bottom of the jar, siphon off the oil on top and re-jar the oil in another container (discard any remaining water to reduce the chance of spoilage.)



Now on to the uses...This oil has many health benefits! Its main claim to fame is helping soothe ear infections but it is also beloved by those suffering from inflamed, cracked skin.

Often mullein flower oil is combined with St. John's Wort flowers (excellent for nerve sensitivity) to make an ear oil. Mullein flowers have antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, and analgesic properties that are helpful for pain, inflammation, and fighting infections. To use the oil, warm it slightly and rub the oil on the outside of the ear. Exercise caution if using oil on any type of wound, or putting drops in the ear. Oil can "trap" microbes and cause an infection (or make an existing infection worse!)



### **Preparing St. John's Wort oil**

Mullein flower oil is also helpful for eczema and inflamed skin. For this use, mullein flowers are often combined with chickweed or calendula, both emollients, to help soothe the inflammatory response.



**Tea** - Mullein flowers also make a lovely tea! Like the leaves, the flowers are soothing to the inflamed respiratory tract and taste great! Consider combining the leaves with the flowers for a balanced moistening and soothing infusion!

**Syrup** – Another great way to ingest mullein flowers is as a simple syrup. Layer fresh flowers in sugar to create a mullein flower syrup that can be taken as is or added to your favorite tea!



## **Mullein Root: Uses and Preparations**

Next, let's examine the many uses and preparations of the root.

The strong-smelling fresh root of mullein is under-appreciated as an astringent (tightening action) for the lower back and pelvic region. Although not as commonly used today, historically, the root was decocted (simmered for several hours) and made into a compress for lower back issues (especially herniated discs) or ingested for prolapse (uterine and bladder) and "boggy" prostrates. Mullein root compresses were also applied to hemorrhoids and boils (probably owing to the root's astringent properties.)

In the vitalist tradition of herbalism, wherever the plant is putting forth its "energy" (it's "growth,") is the part of the plant that is most nutrient dense, or full of "vitality." This influences when to harvest certain parts of plants. Since mullein is a biennial plant, herbalists usually harvest the root during the late fall of the first year of growth – when the plant has stored up its nutrients for the winter (rather than after the second year of growth when the root's vitality is "depleted.")





## Mullein Flower Essence: Uses and Preparations

Finally, let's examine the uses and preparation of the flower essence. A flower essence is a vibrational or energetic (frequency) herbal preparation. A flower essence does not depend on the raw concentration of the herb in the menstruum (solvent.) Rather, diluting the flower infusion is believed to transfer the frequency of the plant's vibrational energy for healing (usually emotional.)

To make a flower essence, first harvest fresh flowers and put them into a bowl of distilled or spring water. Next, allow the sun to shine through the water for at least four hours. After straining, you need to "fix" the water (now called the "mother") with enough alcohol to bring the total to at least 25% alcohol for preservation and to "fix" the energetics of the "mother." After that, put a couple drops of the "mother" in another bottle of water to consume.

**NOTE:** Continuing to dilute the "mother" several times is believed to increase the vibrational medicine, causing it to become more potent!



Mullein's flower essence is commonly recommended for those who need to connect deeper with who they are and get into "alignment." For example, a lot of people in the modern world find themselves compromising their inner values due to external circumstances or pressures. This flower essence is recommended for those who need a strong "spine" (like the spike that shoots up in the plant's second year of growth.)



## **Conclusion**

We hope that this e-booklet has been helpful in understanding the many gifts of the mullein plant. Often dismissed as a "weed" to be poisoned or cursed, mullein has centuries of use for a myriad of conditions. Take a walk around and we're sure you'll find it near you!