

THE LION-HEARTED HERB

Motherwort

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Motherwort is a welcome sign of summer. While its leafy shoots can be found flourishing low to the ground in woodlands, fields, and urban gardens in the spring, by early June, this hardy perennial plant grows into unbridled wand-like stalks at least a foot tall, tipped with spiky tails of fuzzy lavender-pink blossoms. Motherwort is an adaptive, wild, and nourishing plant, beloved by bumblebees and other pollinating insects that bustle around its columnar blooms to drink; by mid-summer, its palmate leafy stalks can grow up to five feet tall, offering shade to many surrounding plant neighbours. Motherwort has a special place in my heart, as it was one of the first medicinal plants to find its way into my backyard herb garden, and during my herbal studies invited me to work with its soothing restorative energy, while strengthening my relationship with change.

Motherwort's botanical Latin name *Leonurus cardiaca* describes its "lion-hearted" nature. Widely known as a herbal preparation with soothing and toning qualities specific to the heart and womb, this mint-family plant contains an elegant biochemical profile. Terpenes, alkaloids, sterols, and iridoids support the body in mediating inflammation and exerting regulatory action on vascular structures and blood flow.¹ Motherwort expresses a diverse range of actions; it's considered cardiotoxic, emmenagogue, digestive, diaphoretic, antispasmodic, and nervine. It is known as a strengthening balm for the heart—not solely from a biochemical or physiological perspective but also from an emotional and energetic one. Seventeenth-century English botanist and herbalist Nicholas Culpepper wrote of motherwort as "no better herb to drive melancholy vapours from the heart, to strengthen it and make the mind cheerful."²

Motherwort possesses a powerfully bitter flavour, which stimulates digestion and has a relaxing effect on the sympathetic nervous system via an impressive network of bitter receptors that begins with the tongue and extends throughout the body. We now understand that

there are bitter receptors distributed throughout the gastrointestinal lining, the cardiovascular system, and even the ovaries.³ Motherwort's bitterness stimulates a "downward bearing" and grounding action in the body;⁴ it's cooling and soothing to an overheated nervous system and effective at draining excess fluids, which ameliorates conditions of heat, stagnant blood, and nervous tension in the body.^{4,5} Herbalist Margi Flint describes motherwort as a nourishing aid to overextended caregivers so they may approach tending to their loved ones with a sense of resourcefulness and calm.

In my practice, I find motherwort to be an invaluable ally in supporting cardiovascular health, bringing balance and nourishment to an overstimulated system, steadying an irregular heartbeat due to an overactive thyroid, and calming tachycardia accompanying anxiety or psycho-emotional stress. It's a sound addition to a nervine formula; in my experience, motherwort anchors mental energy and imbues a soothing sense of maternal nurturance. I reach for the herb to support women's health throughout the cycles of their lives, aiding in premenstrual symptoms, suppressed or irregular menses, and hot flashes and tension due to hormonal shifts in perimenopause.⁶

HISTORY

The name *Leonurus* has its origins in the Greek words "leon," meaning lion and "ouros," meaning tail—a nod to the plant's appearance resembling a lion's tail.⁷ Motherwort hails from Central and Northern Asia, and studies show it was used in Tibet almost 2,000 years ago.⁸ Traditional Chinese medicine texts describe motherwort's early usage as an aid to women's health, specifically in conditions requiring regulation of blood flow, from menstrual disturbances to postpartum hemorrhage.¹ Motherwort made its way into Western Europe in the early 17th century, where it became known for use in addressing conditions of spastic colic, heart palpitations, febrile delirium, restlessness, and disturbed sleep.⁹

Motherwort has been well situated in North America since the early 19th century, where it has been utilised as an internal preparation by American Indigenous peoples of the Delaware, Micmac, Mohegan, Oklahoma, and Shinnecock. It was used to support women's reproductive health as an aid to painful premenstrual cramping or delayed menses. The Cherokee and Iroquois traditionally utilised motherwort as a tonic for the nervous system and as a digestive aid.⁹

PROPERTIES & INDICATIONS

Cardiovascular

Motherwort's cardiotoxic action is bolstered by its considerable terpenoid content, which supports circulation and blood oxygenation, and the alkaloid leonurine, which increases vasodilation.⁶ It possesses a unique cardiac nervine action, which is particularly useful in addressing patterns of irregular or rapid heartbeat accompanied by nervous tension.⁴

Indications:

- » Vascular resistance or high blood pressure accompanied by mental anxiety or nervous tension
- » Rapid heartbeat and heart palpitations related to nervous tension
- » Rapid heartbeat and heart palpitations related to overactive thyroid function

Women's Reproduction

A uterine tonic, motherwort is useful for conditions relating to menses and menopause and was traditionally utilised postpartum to assist with tonifying the womb and optimising milk production.⁶

Indications:

- » Pelvic pain with co-occurring anxiety symptoms, heart palpitations
- » Hot flashes and other symptoms of menopause that occur during hormonal shifts
- » Delayed menses, particularly when accompanied by uterine tension
- » Premenstrual uterine pain

Nervous System

Motherwort's bitter flavour makes it particularly useful in toning and relaxing the nervous system. Bitter receptors on the tongue connect to a network of bitter receptors throughout the body, which act on the sympathetic branch of the nervous system to reduce tension and overstimulation.

Indications:

- » Agitation accompanied by tension
- » Disturbed sleep
- » Menopausal insomnia
- » Exhausted caregivers

Digestive

Motherwort's bitter flavour acts on taste receptors, which stimulate the digestive and biliary tracts. Stimulating these systems assists and optimises the body's breakdown and assimilation of nutrients.

Indications:

- » Sluggish digestion
- » Sluggish hepatobiliary function



LEONURUS CARDIACA

Common names: Motherwort, lion's tail, lion's heart, mother's plant

Family: *Lamiaceae* (mint family)

Parts used: Aerial parts (leaves and flowering tops)

Taste: Bitter, acrid, aromatic

Energy: Cooling, drying, relaxant

Active Constituents:

- » Alkaloids (leonurine, tachydrine, betonicine, turicin, stachydrine)
- » Iridoids (leonuride)
- » Labdane diterpenes (leocardin)
- » Flavonoids (apigenin, kaempferol, and quercetin glucosides)
- » Caffeic acid
- » Tannins
- » Volatile oils

Herbal Actions:

- » Cardiotoxic
- » Cardiac nervine
- » Emmenagogue
- » Anxiolytic
- » Spasmodic
- » Hepatic/ bitter tonic
- » Anti-inflammatory, diaphoretic

Internally:

- » Tones the cardiovascular structures
- » Uterine tonic
- » Emmenagogue
- » Nervine tonic
- » Digestive aid
- » Hepatic

Externally:

Can be applied to the lower abdomen as a fomentation to ease menstrual pain.¹⁰

System Tropism:

- » *Cardiovascular:* Heart and vascular structures
- » *Women's reproductive system:* Uterus
- » *Nervous system:* Nerves
- » *Gastrointestinal:* Stomach

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PLANT DESCRIPTION

A perennial plant, motherwort has a signature square stem with opposite leaves that become elongated and progressively smaller in size closer to the top of the plant. The leaves are palmate, prominently veined, and three-lobed with deeply toothed edges and a notable pale down on their undersides. Distal parts of the plant contain columns of bell-shaped prickly calyxes and small sessile, two-lipped flowers that are fuzzy and pink to lavender in colour, which circle the stem in a whorl pattern.¹⁰ Motherwort is extremely tolerant to drought and spreads easily. Harvesting is best when the flowers first begin to bud.

Character

Under the zodiac of Leo, a fixed fire sign with the governance of the heart and cardiovascular structures, motherwort’s planetary correspondence is to Venus by virtue of its cooling, stabilising, and relaxing qualities and its affinity for women’s reproductive organs.⁵

CONTRAINDICATIONS & SAFETY

Not to be consumed during pregnancy. Motherwort increases blood flow to the womb and can exacerbate heavy menses. It can also interfere with cardiac medications.¹¹



PREPARATIONS & APPLICATIONS

Dosage: 1–4 g dried herb daily

Tincture: 1:5 in 40%, 1–4 ml three times daily (TID)

Tea (infusion): Pour 1 cup of low boiled water over 1–2 tsp of dried herb, steep covered for 10–15 minutes. Add honey, lemon, ginger, or culinary herbs such as rosemary to help subdue the herb’s bitterness.

Fresh: Leaves, flowers, and the upper portion of stems can be utilised to make a home herbal tincture by chopping and filling a sterilised jar two-thirds full with plant material. Add menstrum spirit such as vodka to cover one inch above the plant material, making sure all is submerged. Cover the opening with wax paper and seal with a lid. Store the preparation in a cool place out of direct sun and gently shake the jar daily for six weeks. Strain through cheesecloth and press out the remaining herbal material. Enjoy your homemade fresh tincture preparation for up to two years after making it. ¹²

For references visit ecoparent.ca/EXTRAS/SUM24

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