

Intriguing World of Weeds

White Man's Foot: Broadleaf Plantain¹

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Plantain, which weary toilers dig from their lawns, hoe from their gardens, or cultivate from their fields was brought to the United States to serve man. Originally considered a valuable medicinal herb and an edible green, it was grown in monastery gardens and was cultivated in botanic gardens. It still is raised as a crop for bird feed.

The name "plantain" (pronounced plan-tin) is of Old French origin and was derived from the Latin *plantage*. The word's root, "planta" alludes to the sole of the foot, a reference to its flat leaves.

Broadleaf plantain (*Plantago major* L. #³ PLAMA) is an Eurasian weed. The first appearance of plantain (as plautein) in English was in Wolckers *Arnoglosa*, published in 1265. Carolus Linnaeus named the species in 1753. Its competitive advantages — tough taproot, remarkable fecundity, and broad round leaves — have resulted in its worldwide distribution. Plantains have invaded many of the world's agricultural regions, occurring in more than 50 countries.

Studies of peat bog pollen grains reveal that plantain was growing in England before recorded history. H. Helbaek, a Danish researcher, reported that seeds of *P. major* and *P. lanceolata* were found in northern Europe in the stomachs of 'bog people' whose mummified remains date from the 3rd and 5th centuries A.D. In *Acuna*, an 11th century Anglo-Saxon leech book, Alfric recommended plantain as a beneficial roadside herb. Its smooth, cool leaves offered relief for sore feet, a common affliction when walking was the usual way of traveling.

Plantain appears in many medieval pictures of the Nativity. Albrecht Durer, an artist of the German

Renaissance, frequently used plantains and dandelions in his woodcuts, engravings, and paintings. Plantain also is recorded in English literature. Chaucer mentioned it in 1386; and in *Romeo and Juliet*, published in 1592, Shakespeare refers to it as a familiar household cure-all.

Plantain was used as a healing agent for centuries. Southern Europeans placed plantain poultices on scorpion stings and snake bites, giving it the folk names "snake plant" and "serpent tongue." Farmers used plantain to treat the severe cuts from scythe and sickle at harvest time.

Plantain's medicinal properties occur in its broad, ribbed leaves, which contain a soothing, mucilaginous fluid. Crushing the leaves and applying them as a poultice to a wound often brings relief. The herbalist Gerard reported that plantain juice dropped in the eyes "cools the heate and inflammation thereof." The reason for the plant's fame, he noted, is its "great commoditie" of growing everywhere.

The Puritans brought plantain to New England where it was introduced to Boston, Plymouth, and the Cape Code settlements. English settlers took plantain to all the seaboard colonies, where they continued its use as a home remedy for deep cuts and sore feet. American birds found plantain seed palatable. Birds, wind, and settler's boots and wagon wheels spread plantain so rapidly in fields and roadsides that the Indians named it "white man's foot." In 1798, European botanist Peter Kalm found plantain so common in New England that he supposed the plant was native there. As plantain moved westward with the pioneers, it became a troublesome weed.

Plantain was among the first European herbs grown in the Calcutta Botanic Garden, which the British East India Company established as a plant repository and distribution center in 1786. In China, Japan, and other parts of the world, plantain has been used as a leafy vegetable. The young leaves can be used like spinach or eaten as a salad. S. Boorman gives a recipe for "Sweet and Sour Plantain" in his book, *Wild Plums in Brandy* (McGraw-Hill Company of Canada, Ltd., 1962). Dried plantain

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³Letters following this symbol are a WSSA-approved computer code from Composite List of Weeds, *Weed Sci.*, 32, Suppl. 2. Available from WSSA, 309 West Clark Street, Champaign, IL 61820.

leaves can be brewed as tea, and "plantain leaf tea" is available in the market.

Like broadleaf plantain, buckhorn plantain (*P. lanceolata* L. # PLALA), a European perennial, has become a widespread weed. It has narrow leaves and short cylinders of seed at the apex of its flower spikes. It is particularly troublesome on prairie grasslands and on the high plains. On a worldwide basis, *P. lanceolata* is said to be one of the most successful noncultivated colonizing species.

A third species, blackseed plantain (*P. rugelii* Dcne. # PLARU) is believed to be a native peren-

nial. Occurring only in the eastern half of the United States, it resembles broadleaf plantain but has large black seeds, wavy round leaves, and purple-tinged leaf stalks.

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