

# Yarrow

**Botanical:** *Achillea millefolium* (LINN.)

**Family:** N.O. Compositae

## Synonyms

Milfoil. Old Man's Pepper. Soldier's Woundwort. Knight's Milfoil. Herbe Militaris. Thousand Weed. Nose Bleed. Carpenter's Weed. Bloodwort. Staunchweed. Sanguinary. Devil's Nettle. Devil's Plaything. Bad Man's Plaything. Yarroway. (Saxon) Gearwe. (Dutch) Yerw. (Swedish) Field Hop.

## Part Used

Whole Herb.

## Habitat

Yarrow grows everywhere, in the grass, in meadows, pastures, and by the roadside. As it creeps greatly by its roots and multiplies by seeds it becomes a troublesome weed in gardens, into which it is seldom admitted in this country, though it is cultivated in the gardens of Madeira.

The name *Yarrow* is a corruption of the Anglo-Saxon name for the plant - *gearwe*; the Dutch, *yerw*.

## Description

The stem is angular and rough, the leaves alternate, 3 to 4 inches long and 1 inch broad, clasping the stem at the base, bipinnatifid, the segments very finely cut, giving the leaves a feathery appearance.

It flowers from June to September, the flowers, white or pale lilac, being like minute daisies, in flattened, terminal, loose heads, or cymes. The whole plant is more or less hairy, with white, silky appressed hairs.

Yarrow was formerly much esteemed as a vulnerary, and its old names of Soldier's Wound Wort and Knight's Milfoil testify to this. The Highlanders still make an ointment from it, which they apply to wounds, and Milfoil tea is held in much repute in the Orkneys for dispelling melancholy. Gerard tells us it is the same plant with which Achilles stanchd the bleeding wounds of his soldiers, hence the name of the genus, *Achillea*. Others say that it was discovered by a certain Achilles, Chiron's disciple. It was called by the Ancients, the *Herba Militaris*, the military herb.

Its specific name, *millefolium*, is derived from the many segments of its foliage, hence also its popular name, Milfoil and Thousand Weed. Another popular name for it is Nosebleed, from its property of stanching bleeding of the nose, though another reason

given for this name is that the leaf, being rolled up and applied to the nostrils, causes a bleeding from the nose, more or less copious, which will thus afford relief to headache. Parkinson tells us that 'if it be put into the nose, assuredly it will stay the bleeding of it' - so it seems to act either way.

It was one of the herbs dedicated to the Evil One, in earlier days, being sometimes known as Devil's Nettle, Devil's Plaything, Bad Man's Plaything, and was used for divination in spells.

Yarrow, in the eastern counties, is termed *Yarroway*, and there is a curious mode of divination with its serrated leaf, with which the inside of the nose is tickled while the following lines are spoken. If the operation causes the nose to bleed, it is a certain omen of success:

'Yarroway, Yarroway, bear a white blow,  
If my love love me, my nose will bleed now.'

An ounce of Yarrow sewed up in flannel and placed under the pillow before going to bed, having repeated the following words, brought a vision of the future husband or wife:

'Thou pretty herb of Venus' tree,  
Thy true name it is Yarrow;  
Now who my bosom friend must be,  
Pray tell thou me to-morrow.'  
---(Halliwell's *Popular Rhymes*, etc.)

It has been employed as snuff, and is also called Old Man's Pepper, on account of the pungency of its foliage. Both flowers and leaves have a bitterish, astringent, pungent taste.

In the seventeenth century it was an ingredient of salads.

### **Parts Used**

The whole plant, stems, leaves and flowers, collected in the wild state, in August, when in flower.

### **Constituents**

A dark green, volatile oil, a peculiar principle, *achillein*, and achilleic acid, which is said to be identical with aconitic acid, also resin, tannin, gum and earthy ash, consisting of nitrates, phosphates and chlorides of potash and lime.

### **Medicinal Action and Uses**

Diaphoretic, astringent, tonic, stimulant and mild aromatic.

Yarrow Tea is a good remedy for severe colds, being most useful in the commencement of fevers, and in cases of obstructed perspiration. The infusion is made with 1 OZ. of dried herb to 1 pint of boiling water, drunk warm, in wineglassful doses. It may be sweetened with sugar, honey or treacle, adding a little Cayenne

Pepper, and to each dose a teaspoonful of Composition Essence. It opens the pores freely and purifies the blood, and is recommended in the early stages of children's colds, and in measles and other eruptive diseases.

A decoction of the whole plant is employed for bleeding piles, and is good for kidney disorders. It has the reputation also of being a preventative of baldness, if the head be washed with it.

### **Preparations**

Fluid extract, 1/2 to 1 drachm. An ointment made by the Highlanders of Scotland of the fresh herb is good for piles, and is also considered good against the scab in sheep.

An essential oil has been extracted from the flowers, but is not now used.

Linnaeus recommended the bruised herb, fresh, as an excellent vulnerary and styptic. It is employed in Norway for the cure of rheumatism, and the fresh leaves chewed are said to cure toothache.

In Sweden it is called 'Field Hop' and has been used in the manufacture of beer. Linnaeus considered beer thus brewed more intoxicating than when hops were used.

It is said to have a similar use in Africa.

Culpepper spoke of Yarrow as a profitable herb in cramps, and Parkinson recommends a decoction to be drunk warm for ague.

The medicinal values of the Yarrow and the Sneezewort (*A. millefolium* and *A. ptarmica*), once famous in physic, were discarded officially in 1781.

Woolly Yellow Yarrow (*A. tomentosa*) is very rare, and a doubtful native; its leaves are divided and woolly, the flowers bright yellow.