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THE BENEFITS AND THE USE OF MARSHMALLOW IN HERBAL PREPARATIONS

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THE BENEFITS AND THE USE OF MARSHMALLOW IN HERBAL PREPARATIONS

HISTORY OF MARSHMALLOW

Marshmallow is a fascinating plant with a long enduring history. It has been used for a wide variety of ailments and is very nutritious. It grows so readily in many areas that most assume it is an unwanted weed, as happens so often with beneficial plants. It is not native to North America and was likely brought over by accident.¹

Marshmallow root has been used for many things, both historically and in modern times. It is an amazing demulcent, an emollient, a gentle food, heals and soothes injuries inside and out. This plant can be used for gangrene, for the kidneys, the respiratory system, eyes, skin and more.

One of the most well known original uses of marshmallow is the "marshmallow" itself, or what began the fluffy white dessert food we know today as a marshmallow. Sadly, today's marshmallows have nothing in common with their ancestors. Instead of healing they do the exact opposite, damaging the body with dyes, sugars, preservatives, and gelatins that sometimes come from animal sources.

As early as 2000 BC the ancient Egyptians first began making "marshmallows" with a sap from the plant, adding honey to make a sweetened dessert which was also a sore throat remedy.² This evolved over time to using the cleaned freshly dug roots, chopping them and simmering the roots with sugar (and in those days a more natural sugar than we'd see today). The resulting sweetened pieces of root were chewed and enjoyed by children and adults alike. At the same time a sweet treat was enjoyed, the person also received a dose of medicinal goodness that was a boost to their health. It

¹ "Marshmallow Leaf", www.mountainroseherbs.com.

² "Herbs & Healing Properties - Page 7", www.legendsofamerica.com.

was the French in the 1800's who really started the trend to super sweeten the healthy treat. They used the sap, and whipped it with egg whites and syrups to make a chewy soft confection.³ Over time the nutritious treat became the marshmallow we have commercially available today.

Pliny the Elder, an ancient Roman naturalist, stated that "whosoever shall take a spoonful of the Mallows shall that day be free from all diseases that may come to him"⁴. Romans Horace and Martial wrote of its use as a gentle laxative.⁵ Marshmallow has been used by many other peoples and cultures around the world as food and medicine as well. Gypsies used the tea or pieces of root for teething babies and toddlers.⁶ The ancient Arab physicians used the leaves as poultices for inflammation.⁷ Hippocrates used it to clean and heal wounds. The emperor of most of Western Europe in 800, Charlemagne, ordered that Marshmallow was to be grown throughout his lands.⁸ Dioscorides, a Roman physician, used it more extensively, for wounds, inflammations, bee stings, toothaches, and diarrhea.⁹ Dioscorides also spoke of Musk Mallow being used on grave sites.¹⁰ Marshmallow is even mentioned in Homer's *Illiad* almost three thousand years ago.¹¹ During the middle ages, common mallow was known to be an antidote for aphrodisiacs and love potions.¹² It is noted in *Breverton's Complete Herbal*

³ "Marshmallows", www.candyusa.com.

⁴ T. Breverton, *Breverton's Complete Herbal*, Kindle version location 4530.

⁵ J. Christopher, *Herb Syllabus*, pg. 375; M. Grieve, *A Modern Herbal, Vol. II*, Kindle version location 3136.

⁶ J. Christopher, *Herb Syllabus*, pg. 376.

⁷ "Inflammation", www.herballegacy.com.

⁸ J. Christopher, *Herb Syllabus* pg. 375.

⁹ "It's a Marshmallow World", www.smithsonianmag.com.

¹⁰ M. Grieve, *A Modern Herbal, Vol. II*, Kindle version location 3136.

¹¹ "Marshmallow Root", www.mountainroseherbs.com.

¹² T. Breverton, *Breverton's Complete Herbal*, Kindle version location 4500.

that marshmallow will encourage hair growth which correlates with the plants downy covering as suggested in the 16th century Doctrine of Signatures.

Herbalists have used it for people and animals alike. In the Renaissance era, herbalists used it for sore throats, toothaches, and gonorrhoea.¹³ Animals have been fed the plants intentionally and have also been known to graze on wild marshmallow. Marshmallow can be used safely from infancy throughout one's entire life. It is soothing to the body both internally and externally and continues to be a valuable herb to modern herbalists.

¹³ J. Christopher, *Herb Syllabus*, pg. 375.

LOCATION OF MARSHMALLOW

Marshmallow is a plant that grows in nearly any location and is not overly sensitive to soil or weather conditions. When given a choice it thrives best in moist, moderate areas.¹⁴ It is native to western Asia and northern Europe, though it is now throughout the US, especially on the Atlantic coast.¹⁵ It also grows very well in sub-tropical and tropical areas.¹⁶

Marshmallow is a very flexible plant that does well in areas with either full sun or partial shade areas.¹⁷ This perennial grows best in Zones 5 - 8, the more moderate weather regions though as said earlier it will grow outside these areas as well.¹⁸ Marshmallow is generally easy to find wild grown but is also fairly simple to cultivate. Marshmallow grows fairly easily from seed or root cuttings.¹⁹

The plant itself is often found spreading out on the ground but if it has plenty of moisture and good weather it will grow tall, even up to 3-4 feet in height.²⁰ It spreads so easily it is sometimes called a weed by those unfamiliar with the extensive benefits of Marshmallow. The leaves are palmate shape, somewhat rounded with blunted points on the lobes (of which there are 5-7). The leaves are very soft in texture. Since the whole plant is mucilaginous it is slimy when crushed, making it easy to see how the plant is so healing and gentle. The fruit of the Marshmallow is known as “cheesies” as

¹⁴ J. Christopher, *Herbal Syllabus*, pg. 379.

¹⁵ *Natures Medicine Chest ID Cards*, Mallow; “Marshmallow Leaf”, www.mountainroseherbs.com.

¹⁶ J. Christopher, *School of Natural Healing - Herbal Reference Guide*, pg. 334.

¹⁷ T. Hartung, *Homegrown Herbs*, pg. 207.

¹⁸ R. Gladstar, *Rosemary Gladstar's Medicinal Herbs*, pg. 167.

¹⁹ "Mallows", <http://www.botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/m/mallow07.html>.

²⁰ R. Gladstar, *Rosemary Gladstar's Medicinal Herbs*, pg. 167.

they resemble little wheels of cheese and are tasty to eat.²¹ The flowers have five petals in a funnel shape and a variety of colors.²² The more common colors are shades of pink and whites, though even blues are seen in the wider marshmallow family.²³

To harvest the plant, the stem and leaves, wait until it is about to flower or flowering, then collect the upper portion of the plant, up to 10" or just a few leaves. It is best to wait until after two years of growth before harvesting the roots and it is ideal to wait until fall when most of the plants energy has been concentrated in the roots. Use the plant fresh or dry thoroughly before storing.²⁴ By the time the root is harvested, the tap root is usually too tough to use and less medicinal than the other roots, so discard that part of the root system.²⁵

²¹ J. Christopher, *Herbal Syllabus*, pg. 372.

²² R. J. Elpel, *Botany in a Day*, pg. 105.

²³ T. Breverton, *Breverton's Complete Herbal*, location 4520; J. Christopher, *Herbal Syllabus*, pg. 372.

²⁴ C. Hobbs, Gardener, L, *Grow It, Heal It*, Kindle version location 1228.

²⁵ J. Christopher, *School of Natural Healing - Herbal Reference Guide*, pg. 334.

CHEMICAL CONSTITUENT OF MARSHMALLOW

There are quite a few chemical constituents of note to mention in regards to Marshmallow. The most well known are the mucilage and the antioxidant flavonoids. It is interesting to note that more than a quarter of the roots are mucilage alone.²⁶ This mucilage is made of two types, arabinogalactans and galacturonorhamnan. The known flavonoids are 8-hydroxyluteolin and 8-b-gentiobioside. The root also contains asparagines, an amino acid; quercetin, coumarins, fats, kaempferol, phenolic acids, tannins, sugars and volatile oil.²⁷

In addition to a quarter of the root being mucilage, another 10% each are pectin and sugars, and another 35% is starch. Of the remaining, up to two percent is asparagline, an active medicinal component.²⁸ There are also small amounts of salicylic acid, lecithin, amino acids, beta-carotene and a variety on minerals such as iron, calcium, several B vitamins and also vitamin C among others.²⁹ The percentages of the total plant of each component can of course vary from plant to plant but generally the proportions will be similar.³⁰ The leaf is similar in composition, but not identical. The leaf mucilage is made of the same two types, arabinogalactans and galacturonorhamnan and also contains tannins, phenolic acids and volatile oil.³¹

²⁶ J. Christopher, *Herbal Syllabus*, pg. 379.

²⁷ "Marshmallow Root", www.mountainroseherbs.com.

²⁸ J. Christopher, *Herbal Syllabus*, pg. 379.

²⁹ T. Breverton, *Breverton's Complete Herbal*, Kindle version location 4520.

³⁰ R. Gladstar, *Rosemary Gladstar's Medicinal Herbs*, pg. 167.

³¹ "Marshmallow Leaf", www.mountainroseherbs.com.

MEDICINAL QUALITIES OF MARSHMALLOW

Marshmallow is best known for its emollient and demulcent properties which are so effective they are useful in many healing applications. It can soothe the body internally and externally. It is also a diuretic, mucilage, nutritive, vulnerary, absorbent, laxative, and a protectant.³² Marshmallow lives up to its name: *Althaea Officinalis* of the order Malvaceae. *Althaea* is Greek, “to heal” or “to cure”, while the order name Malvaceae, also Greek, means “soft”.³³

As an emollient it can be added to any ointments, oils, poultices or fomentations in order to heal inflamed or irritated tissues.³⁴ An application of just marshmallow is an excellent healer. Added to a bath it can soothe dry and irritated skin, making it very useful for things like eczema or other rashes.³⁵ It is effective enough to heal gangrene as well (which will be discussed later in this paper).

Used internally, it will soothe the entire body but it is particularly known for healing the kidneys and bladder.³⁶ Marshmallow, in addition to its demulcent properties is a diuretic which makes it that more powerful in healing the urinary tract.³⁷ It is ideal in any situation where there is irritation and/or inflammation. Marshmallow also boosts the immune system, improving overall health.³⁸

³² J. Christopher, *School of Natural Healing - Herbal Reference Guide*, pg. 327.

³³ M. Grieve, *A Modern Herbal, Vol. II*, Kindle version location 3125.

³⁴ J. Green, *The Herbal Medicine Maker's Handbook*, Location pg. 582.

³⁵ R. Gladstar, *Rosemary Gladstar's Medicinal Herbs*, pg. 167.

³⁶ R. Gladstar, *Rosemary Gladstar's Medicinal Herbs*, pg. 167; J. Duke, *The Green Pharmacy Guide to Healing Foods*, Kindle version location 2566.

³⁷ J. Kloss, *Back to Eden*, pg. 154.

³⁸ J. Duke, *The Green Pharmacy Guide to Healing Foods*, Kindle version location 4946.

CONTRA - INDICATIONS OF MARSHMALLOW

My research of herbal lore, books and accepted plant and herbal material has shown that it is gentle and healing for such a wide variety of conditions with no side effects. Over a thousand varieties have been found, all with mucilaginous properties and no known toxicity.³⁹ Upon beginning online research, however, many instances of possible contra-indications were revealed. Sources for the contra-indications usually mentioned "one study" without substantiating the study. No where in my research did I find the actual study or studies that document such adverse reactions. According to scientific principle, an experiment or study must be repeated numerous times before being accepted as scientific law.⁴⁰

One site references a study that says that Marshmallow could decrease blood sugar.⁴¹ The high amounts of fiber and mucilage in Marshmallow this plant helps to balance out the sugar spikes in the body.⁴² Many of us often start eating better or cleansing with herbs with the intent of healing and reducing or eliminating medications. What sometimes happens is the body heals and needs less interference in the form of drugs. However modern medicine does not accept that herbs are a safe and effective means of healing, therefore we have warnings of safety concerns abounding. Another facet to investigate is that some Marshmallow is taken in a glycerin syrup versus alcohol or powder or tea.⁴³

³⁹ J. Christopher, *Herbal Syllabus*, pg. 372; ³⁹ M. Grieve, *A Modern Herbal, Vol. II*, Kindle version location 3110.

⁴⁰ Wile, Dr. Jay L. *Exploring Creation with General Science*, pg. 40.

⁴¹ "Marshmallow", umm.edu/health/altmed/herb/marshmallow.

⁴² "Mallow, Marsh *Althaea Officinalis* L.", www.anniesremedy.com.

⁴³ "Marshmallow (*Althaea Officinalis*) - oral", www.medicinenet.com.

I also found one warning stating Marshmallow could reduce how much iron is absorbed.⁴⁴ The source is not identified. Isolating one mineral doesn't make sense, it seems more likely that either a group of minerals would be affected or the study was inaccurate. Another unsubstantiated source states there are some concerns about lithium absorption while taking Marshmallow.⁴⁵ A solution may be to take lithium and marshmallow at separate times. Another site stated that there is a tumor growth enhancer, asparagine, in Marshmallow, but no source to substantiate, nor was this repeated elsewhere in my research.⁴⁶ There are of course large amounts of mucilage in the Marshmallow, so it is possible that this may slow drug absorption... if this were to occur, taking the drugs and the herb at different times should eliminate the potential for interference.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ "Marshmallow Root", store.newwayherbs.com.

⁴⁵ "*Marshmallow*", umm.edu/health/medical/almed/herb/marshmallow.

⁴⁶ "Marshmallow (Althaea)", www.herbwisdom.com.

⁴⁷ C. Hobbs, Gardener, L., *Grow It, Heal It*, Kindle version location 1217.

KNOWN HERBAL FORMULAS OF MARSHMALLOW

There are many Dr. Christopher formulas available commercially containing marshmallow.⁴⁸ And many more formulas used by him and others that contain this wonderful root. The current commercial formulas include: Immucalm, Male Urinary Tract Formula, Lung & Bronchial Formula, Kidney Formula, Complete Tissue & Bone Formula, BF&C, Infection Formula, Sinus Plus Formula, Bladder Formula, VB Herbal Bolus, Super Garlic Immune Formula, and Rash Ointment.⁴⁹

There are so many uses for Marshmallow, but a few will be mentioned. A tea of just Marshmallow or Marshmallow and Raspberry leaf will boost the nutrition of a mothers milk.⁵⁰ Marshmallow tea with cayenne will heal gangrene, soaking the limb or area in tea or fomentations if tolerated, alternated with cold water.⁵¹ It's effectiveness with gangrene led to its nickname... mortification root, as it stops the mortification of the tissue.⁵²

Marshmallow is also exceptionally soothing to a cough or other respiratory ailment on its own or added to an herbal cough syrup.⁵³ The tea is an effective eye wash for irritation or infections. The tea can also be used as a douche for ailments/ infections within the vagina.⁵⁴ I have in the past used fomentations of either BF&C (containing marshmallow) or fomentations of marshmallow and plantain to heal mastitis. A formula of equal parts Marshmallow root and Thyme, made into a syrup with honey or

⁴⁸ "Dr. Christopher's Capsulated Formulas", <http://www.herbsfirst.com>.

⁴⁹ J. Christopher, *Herbal Syllabus*, pg. 379-80.

⁵⁰ J. Christopher, C. Gildeadi, *Every Woman's Herbal*, Kindle version location 1574.

⁵¹ J. Christopher, *Herbal Syllabus*, pg. 374.

⁵² ⁵² J. Christopher, *School of Natural Healing - Herbal Reference Guide*, pg. 327.

⁵³ C. Hobbs, Gardener, L., *Grow It, Heal It*, Kindle version location 1218.

⁵⁴ J. Kloss, *Back to Eden*, pg. 154.

sugar with water, creates a syrup that is an effective treatment for whooping cough.⁵⁵

Twice in the last month I have been told that there is “great concern” about this disease currently in our area. One person even warned a friend not to visit her newborn unless they were vaccinated.

⁵⁵ J. Christopher, *School of Natural Healing - Herbal Reference Guide*, pg. 329.

DOSAGE AND APPLICATIONS OF MARSHMALLOW

Marshmallow can be used in a variety of ways and dosages vary with use. And, with this healing herb, one cannot “over-use” in terms of dosage. However, as Dr. Christopher indicates, there are standard doses.⁵⁶ He recommends the following:

Powder: 2 - 00 capsules, 3 times a day (does not have to be in capsule)

Tincture: 2 dropperfuls (1/2 to 1 tsp), 3 times a day

Infusion: 1 cup (6 oz), 3 times a day

Decoction: 1 cup (6 oz), 3 times a day

Syrup: from the root, 1/2 - 2 teaspoons, 3 times a day

The plant can be used in a variety of ways: The crushed or chopped fresh roots make a very healing poultice for inflamed or irritated areas; infusions and decoctions can be made from either fresh or dried and used to drink or as fomentations; fresh roots, stems, leaves, flowers can all be used in smoothies for the nutritional and healing benefits; dried roots are great to have on hand when one cannot find or has the time to gather fresh; and the root powder is a good thickener and can also coat things, such as tablets, lozenges, or even raw cookies.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ J. Christopher, *School of Natural Healing - Herbal Reference Guide*, pg. 328.

⁵⁷ J. Christopher, *School of Natural Healing - Herbal Reference Guide*, pg. 327.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Marshmallow root is the most commonly used herb in our home. It has played a large part in building good health in our oldest son. He is ten years old now, strong and healthy, though he still has food allergies and asthma. Ten years ago, it was a different story. Within weeks of his birth, his father and I knew something was wrong. Despite doctors repeatedly telling us he was fine, we knew he wasn't. It took months to finally confirm what we already knew: he had many, many serious food allergies. We followed doctors orders, in three different states, ending up near a top pediatric hospital. By the time our son was 8 months old, the doctors had given up on improving his health. He was on round the clock Benadryl, steroids, breathing treatments- both routine and emergency, and was puffy and lethargic. He could only tolerate touching organic cotton, anything else would cause sores and infections on his skin. Doctors told us the combination of asthma, food allergies and eczema was rare, and to just go home and take care of him the best we could. We decided that was not good enough.

We were blessed with friends who were involved with company that sold natural products and had good quality nutritional supplements. We found they had a supplement that was made of grapefruit bioflavonoids. I started taking it (he was nursing 100%, as our one and only solid food attempt resulted in an anaphylactic reaction) and we noticed improvements very quickly. My diet was also severely restricted since his allergies were so widespread. Within two and a half months he was off ALL the drugs and finally beginning to thrive.

For a few years, things continued to improve, we tried various natural and alternative therapies, with varied success. Finally, I discovered the School of Natural

Healing. We began learning about all the amazing herbs available to us. All this time, our son had been taking the same bioflavonoid supplement. However, not long after I started learning about Immucalm (Marshmallow and Astragalus) the company making the supplement we used stopped offering it. I had been considering switching him to the Immucalm for a while but hesitated since it had been working so well for him for so long. Though he was not in immediate danger at the time as when he was an infant, he was still pretty unstable around foods and away from home. With the old supplement going away, though, we knew it was time. God provides. Within days of beginning to take Immucalm we saw another jump of improvement in his health, and a decreasing sensitivity to allergens. That was several years ago. Today, he takes Immucalm when he feels run down, or when he goes into a food related situation, just to give his system a boost. But our boy who was confined to home as a small child can now run around with other children, spend the night at his friends house, and play with other children without having a major reaction. Marshmallow root had an amazing effect on him and he will continue to take it as he continues to heal from the allergies and asthma. I recently found some old notes documenting our diet, his reactions, ER visits and medical treatments from when he was an infant. It was heartbreaking and I am so thankful for finding the herbs that have healed him so much.

We find Marshmallow to be so useful that it is usually one of the first things I grab when we have a new situation come up. A few months ago my friends' 20 year old cat, Belle, was suffering from tumors. This tumor burst and the vet wanted to operate but it sounded like a lot for her to go through. I made up a poultice of Marshmallow root, slippery elm bark and plantain and we applied it to the area daily for a couple weeks.

There was no sign of infection and the vet was pleasantly surprised when he saw her next.

On a lighter note, I harvested a young marshmallow plant I had grown from seed. With the roots washed, scraped, and chopped into small pieces I simmered them in water with a little sugar as done in the past. The resulting candies were delicious! Even the neighborhood children were eating the little root bits. The roots were tasty both hot and cooled. I intend to experiment with a variety of natural sugars in the future. We took the remaining thread sized roots and the plant itself, stalk and leaves and used them in our morning green smoothie. It was a great addition, mild in flavor and nutritious.

Marshmallow is a wonderful addition to any home. No matter what form, fresh, dried, tinctured... it is a most valuable herb to have available at all times. I have several plants growing at my home and have located several patches of wild marshmallow. In addition, I keep dried roots and tinctured Immucalm available at all times. I know that when in need I will be able to have some quickly. I hope to share cuttings from my marshmallow plants with friends and family so they too may have it on hand. Marshmallow is an excellent addition to every home's herbal arsenal.

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