

Liquid Gold

Comfrey – The best source of organic potash.

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The reputed healing qualities of Comfrey have been known about for many years. It was claimed to mend broken bones and also that cuts and bruises would heal over night when dressed with a poultice made up of Comfrey leaves.

That's the folklore, the reality is that we gardeners are more interested in the potash rich fertiliser that we can make from the plant.

Comfrey has very deep searching roots that enable it to access a naturally occurring source of potash deep in the soil. The Comfrey concentrates the potash with nitrogen in it's leaves and it is the release of nitrogen as the leaves decompose that make the smelly liquid so beloved by organic gardeners.

Comfrey has been around for a long time and even though its beneficial qualities had been well known it was also very invasive. It was not until Henry Doubleday started a breeding programme using the Wild Russian Comfrey that he eventually came up with a sterile cultivar, 'Bocking 14' which he named after the place in Essex where it was bred. With this new cultivar it was now possible for gardeners to have their own patch of Comfrey without it seeding and taking over the whole garden.

Bocking 14 is available as plants from various nurseries and seed companies. Though If you know someone with a patch of Comfrey It is worth while asking if you can take a few root cuttings. (As long as you are sure it is Bocking 14.) Cuttings can be taken at most times of the year. I obtained mine from an established clump on our allotment site. I knew it was the Bocking 14 cultivar because even though it flowered profusely there were no self seeded plants around. I took my cuttings in September potting up each one in a 3" pot and then grew them on in a cold greenhouse over winter. The cuttings rooted very easily. I planted out a row of four of the established cuttings in early Spring 4 feet apart. They are quite tolerant plants and cope well in most soils types also tolerating deep to partial shade. The only situation they will not thrive in is a shallow or chalky soil.

Because of it's deep root run it is also not really suited to container growing.

In the first year I allowed my plants to become established and only took one cut of leaves in the autumn. This foliage was compressed into a dustbin and filled with water. This was topped off with a tight fitting lid and left to percolate over winter.

In the spring what is left of the decomposed leaves is floating as a crust on top of the liquid gold and there is no smell whatsoever. The crust is removed to the compost heap and the dark liquid is ready for use.

This liquid is then diluted, 20 parts water to 1 part of the Comfrey fertiliser. It is then used as a feed for my tomatoes and peppers applied once a week. As well as providing the plants with potash it is also claimed to improve the flavour of the fruits. Though be careful that you don't overdose, Comfrey liquid contains ammonium nitrogen, overdosing can lead to blocking the uptake of other nutrients like potassium and calcium. Also because of the nitrogen content Comfrey fertiliser is not suitable as a feed for acid loving plants.

It is in the 2nd year of growth that you can really start to harvest the leaves. I take a first cut in March and use this to line the trench for the first early potatoes. It is best to allow the cut leaves to wilt for two or three days in the bottom of the trench. Then draw a little soil over the leaves and plant the potato sets on top. Then cover the sets with another 4" of soil. There we are, a ready source of potash which is an essential nutrient for potatoes.

You can also add Comfrey to your compost heap, the nitrogen rich leaves are an excellent activator.

If you want to attract pollinating insects leave one or two plants to flower. They have the most attractive blue flowers and all manner of bees will be drawn to them.

Comfrey leaves can also be used as a mulch around soft fruits to give them an extra boost when the fruits are forming.

In the winter the plants will die back. They have been working hard for you, so give them a tidy up. And don't forget to give them a good mulch with farmyard manure, they will reward you in the spring.

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