

Selfheal *Prunella vulgaris*

What's in a name?

Selfheal is also known with the names of heal-all, slough heal, woundwort, pickpocket and 'heart-o' the earth. The last name refers to the belief that it was an indicator of poor soil or that the plant made the soil impoverished.

Its name derives from its former use by herbalists to treat cuts, sore throats, herpes and skin inflammations. The genus name 'Prunella' comes from the German word for quinsy, a severe sore throat caused by a tonsil abscess for which the plant is said to be a cure while the species name 'vulgaris' means "common".



Botany & Ecology

This perennial plant is a member of the mint family (Lamiaceae). The flower is characteristically violet in colour with a soft downy collar below two lip shaped petals. The stem is square shaped and it can grow up to 30cm tall where grasses are left uncut.

It can be quick to colonise waste ground creeping swiftly through grasslands, woodland clearings or roadside verges. It can also develop in the traditional close-cut garden lawn if left unchecked. It is a very good source of nectar for bees and wasps and can be seen in flower between June and October.



Folklore

Apparently, Selfheal used to be gathered by the druids. It was picked at night during the dark phase of the moon, preferably when the Dog Star was rising. It was dug up with the druid's sickle before being held up in the left hand. After this, thanks were said and the plant was prepared for drying, keeping the flowers, leaves and stems separated. Selfheal was once proclaimed to be a holy herb and thought to have been sent by God to cure all ailments of men or animals and said to drive away the Devil.

As a result, it is told that witches used to plant this species in their gardens to confuse the inquisitors during the great 'Witch Hunt'. In 19th century Hampshire children were warned not to pick the flower as the devil would carry them away.

Folk Medicine

The leaves have long been recognised as a cure for boils and used as a plaster for cuts, a practice which was used during the Second World War. The leaves would be moistened with saliva and then placed over the cut. The wound was then bathed in an infusion of leaves and flowers.

A tea was also made from the leaves and flowers, this would be gargled to sooth sore throats and coughs. The Irish also prescribed the tea as a heart tonic, a practice still used by some homeopaths across Europe.

*Please note, readers should take advice from a qualified doctor or herbalist before using plants as a cure for ailments.