

Comfrey

Symphytum officinale L. (Boraginaceae)

Fast Facts:

Acres in Washington: less than 100
Number of Growers: less than 20
Per Acre Value: Comfrey leaf: \$1.50 -\$3.00 per lb
Comfrey root: \$2.80-\$4.00 per lb
Percent of U.S. Acreage: less than 1%

Description of crop:

Comfrey is an herbaceous, perennial that grows in clumps up to 5 feet tall and just as wide. Its leaves are 5 inches wide and 8 to 12 inches long and are covered on the upper surface by short, bristly hairs. The leaves of the plant appear to be stacked. It has a black, turnip-like taproot that can reach up to 6 feet or more into the ground. It is a fast growing plant that likes damp, grassy places and can grow in partial shade to full sun and is very frost resistant. It seeds itself freely to the point of being invasive. Comfrey begins growth in early-April. Three species in the genus *Symphytum* are relevant: wild or common comfrey, prickly or rough comfrey and Quaker, Russian or blue comfrey. Rough comfrey is traditionally grown as a silage crop for pigs, sheep and poultry. Cultivated comfrey is often called Russian comfrey. Of particular interest is a Russian comfrey cultivar called “blocking 14”. It is sterile so it doesn’t spread out of control and is propagated from root cuttings. Comfrey should be planted in offsets 2-3 feet apart. It shouldn’t be harvested in its first season and flowering stems should be removed. Once mature, plants can be harvested 4 to 5 times a year and it is ready for cutting when the plant is about 2 ft. high. The leaf is cut and should be laid out to dry, avoiding the stacking and compaction of leaves. It cannot be dried in the sun because of its high mucilage content. The roots can be harvested with a potato digger. Comfrey leaves are generally harvested with shears and pickers should wear gloves as the leaves and stems are covered with hairs that can irritate the skin. Comfrey plantings can last more than 20 years.

Comfrey is a high yielding leafy green plant that has been used for centuries as a feed crop for animals and a medicine for humans. Herbalists, historically viewed comfrey as an herb with therapeutic benefits. It was used to to cure anything especially broken bones. Its genus name means “grow together”. The herb does contain allantoin, a cell proliferant that speeds up the natural replacement of body cells. However, in 2001 it was removed as an oral dietary supplement from the U.S market and soon afterwards as a commercial animal food source. These actions were taken because comfrey contains dangerous levels of toxic alkaloids and its use has led to liver damage and death. However, this is only when the root

is used. Today, comfrey extract is used for external use in salves and creams for minor wounds. Comfrey is mainly used in Washington as a crop for composting, mulching or green manure. The leaves can be used as fodder for ruminants. As a fertilizer, it is an excellent source of organic potassium and valued by organic farmers. It is an extremely deep rooting plant that accesses nutrients from the soil and is rich in minerals. It can be used to produce high quality compost. A 2-3 inch layer of comfrey will encourage bacterial activity and help heat the heap. Comfrey is also sold in pots as an herb.

Key pests:

Weeds are the major pests in comfrey. These include lambsquarter, pigweeds, chickweed, kochia, Canada thistle and Russian thistle. Disease and insects are not a serious problem in comfrey.

Key pesticides:

Weed control is done by cultivation however after the crop matures its broad leaves successfully compete with many weeds. Comfrey is usually grown without herbicides however; growers can use Round-up if needed.

Critical pest control issues:

When dividing plants, growers should pick strong healthy specimens. When dividing comfrey plants care should be taken to not spread root fragments around or dispose of in a compost heap as they can easily re-root and comfrey can be a difficult plant to get rid of.

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Location

of production: Whitman, Spokane, Whatcom, Skagit, Clallam, Jefferson, Mason, King, Snohomish, Kittitas, Lewis, Cowlitz, and Clark counties.





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Comfrey Production in Washington State

