

Lactuca virosa - Wild Lettuce, Green Endive, Lettuce Opium

- N.O. Compositae - Central and Southern Europe, Northern Asia



It is a biennial herb growing to a maximum height of 6 feet. The erect stem, springing from a brown tap-root, is smooth and pale green, sometimes spotted with purple. There are a few prickles on the lower part and short horizontal branches above. The numerous, large, radical leaves are from 6 to 18 inches long, entire, and obovate-oblong. The stem leaves are scanty, alternate, and small, clasping the stem with two small lobes. The heads are numerous and shortly-stalked, the pale-yellow corolla being strap-shaped. The rough, black fruit is oval, with a broad wing along the edge, and prolonged above into a long, white beak carrying silvery tufts of hair. The whole plant is rich in a milky juice that flows freely from any wound. This has a bitter taste and a narcotic odour. When dry, it hardens, turns brown, and is known as lactucarium.

The Wild Lettuce grows on banks and waste places, flowering in July and August. It is cultivated in Austria, France, Germany and Scotland. Collectors cut the heads of the plants and scrape the juice into china vessels several times daily until it is exhausted. By slightly warming and tapping, it is turned out of its cup mould, is cut into quarters and dried.

In the United States, after importation from Germany via England it is said to be used as an adulterant for opium. It is usually found in irregular, reddish-brown lumps the size of a large pea, frequently mouldy on the outside. In the United States the German and French *lactucarium* is considered inferior to the British product.

All lettuces possess some of this narcotic juice, *Lactuca virosa* having the most, and the others in the following order: *L. scariola*, or Prickly Lettuce, *L. altissima*, *L. Canadensis*, or Wild Lettuce of America, and *L. sativa*, or Garden Lettuce. Cultivation has lessened the narcotic properties of the last, but it is still used for making a lotion for the skin useful in sunburn and roughness. The Ancients held the lettuce in high esteem for its cooling and refreshing properties. The Emperor Augustus attributed his recovery from a dangerous illness to it; built an altar to it, and erected a statue in its honour.

Lactucarium is not easily powdered, and is only slightly soluble in boiling water, though it softens and becomes plastic. *L. virosa* has been found to contain lactucic acid, lactucopicrin, 50 to 60 per cent lactucerin (lactucone) and lactucin. Lactucarium treated with boiling water and filtered is clear, but on cooling the filtrate becomes turbid.

TRADITIONAL PREPARATION: The Hopi smoked the dried resin, or sap, obtained from the plant. The flower would be cut off and the sap that ran

was cut from the stem and more sap collected. This sap was then air-dried and later smoked in ritual. (Similar effects are achieved with the dried leaves.) The Hopi believe that induced dream states contain more information about reality than the conscious waking state. Wild lettuce, aka lettuce opium, is said to enhance the vividness of dreams when smoked prior to sleep.

Another modern method is to dry the leaves and roots and smoke them.

And yet another technique is to heat, not boil, the leaf in water for at least eight hours and then remove the liquid. The lactucarine (active chemical) goes into the water solution. Once the water is evaporated, the result will be a black gum that is often smoked. The resin should be sealed in plastic to prevent it from drying out. An effective dose is generally about 1 ounce of wild lettuce or about 1/2 gram of the extract per person.