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## Wild Lettuce

*Lactuca elongata*

### Common Names

Prickly Lettuce, Horse Thistle, Compass Plant, Opium Lettuce, Wild Opium, Great Lettuce, Lactucarium Lettuce, Bitter Lettuce, Snake Weed, Trompet Weed, Snake Bite, Acrid Lettuce, German Lactucarium, Green Endive, Lactuca virosa, Lettuce Opium, Poison Lettuce, Strong-Scented Lettuce.

### Description

Wild Lettuce, a member of the daisy family, is related to garden lettuce but much stronger in taste, with a sticky, white, milky sap in its circulatory system. Wild Lettuce was used by the South during the U.S. War Between the States when they could not obtain laudanum (a liquid opium preparation) for relief of pain. Wild lettuce is not as strong, but does not have the addictive quality or unpleasant after-effects as does opium. Here, the substitute exceeds the original choice as a remedy.

To reverse insomnia due to mental overwork, Wild Lettuce is the answer. Irritation of the bronchial tubes, lungs, and a cough where the person is wasting away are reversed so the area can be repaired. Wild Lettuce is often mixed with Wood Betony for pain and headache relief.

It is interesting to note that the leaves of Wild Lettuce often line up in a north-south direction and earn the common name of Compass Plant. It could be assumed that this plant, with this peculiar property, may make use of its electrical and magnetic qualities to calm

and balance the nervous system of a person. Certainly, in this day and time, any plant which can help alleviate our pains and restore our nerve energies should be called friend, and thus it is with Wild Lettuce.



**WILD LETTUCE**  
*Lactuca elongata*  
 Photo by Dr. Eugene C. Watkins

### Suggested Dose

For insomnia take 30-40 drops a half hour before bedtime. If necessary, repeat every 5 minutes for the next half hour until sleep is possible. If pain or bronchial irritation is present, use the same as above, but also rub in quantity necessary on the chest.

### Properties

Wild Lettuce is considered a mild sedative that has been known to calm the nerves, treat restlessness, anxiety, hyperactivity and insomnia. Once considered an opium substitute, Wild Lettuce Leaf entered medical practice as a sedative in the eighteenth century because of its similar, but non-addictive, effects. Wild Lettuce has also been used as a diuretic and pain reliever.

### History

Wild Lettuce, sometimes called Prickly Lettuce, is an annual or biennial herb that is native to Europe, but was introduced to North America, where it grows as a weed in dumps, waste places, and on roadsides from Canada throughout the United



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*Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers. (3 John 2)*

States. The plant has erect, slender stems, large, prickly-edged leaves, and heads of tiny yellow flowers that may grow to six feet in height. Called Compass Plant by some (because it turns its leaves to the sun during the day), it thrives in well-drained, dry, alkaline soil in sun; and Wild Lettuce is the ancestor of all lettuce plants. Its use as a medicine may be traced back to ancient times, and even the Roman Emperor, Augustus, was said to have built a statue in honor of his physician, who had prescribed the herb for him and cured him of a serious disease. It was used as a sedative and pain reliever, and the Romans even used it to prevent inebriation. Wild Lettuce entered medical practice as a sedative in the eighteenth century as an adulterate opium because of its similar, but non-addictive, effects; and new mothers once used it to promote lactation. It is a very bitter, sedative herb that was considered an opium substitute into the nineteenth century and was sometimes called a "poor man's opium." Although it is extremely bitter with an unpleasant smell, Wild Lettuce is loved by horses, and some people do cook it as a vegetable and use it in salads. When dried, the leaves produce a milky latex substance called lactucarium, which is used in herbal medicine and in some prescription drugs. Some of the constituents in Wild Lettuce include the important milky latex substance (lactucarium), fiber, and valuable minerals and vitamins.

### **Beneficial Uses**

Whooping cough, asthma, urinary tract problems, cough, hardening of the arteries, insomnia, restlessness, painful periods, muscle and joint pain, and use as a topical antiseptic.

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lactucarium in the leaves is considered mildly narcotic (without being addictive and harsh on the digestive system) and has often been used to induce sleep and to treat insomnia and hyperactivity in children. Because it is soothing to the digestive system, it has also been helpful for colic.

In addition, Wild Lettuce is used as a "nervine," or agent that strengthens the functional activity

of the nervous system, which may have either sedative or stimulating effects. The herb is used to calm restlessness, anxiety, severe nervous disorders, and neuroses.

Wild Lettuce is believed to be an expectorant that has been effective in easing bronchitis, asthma, and dry, irritating coughs by helping to loosen and expel phlegm from the respiratory tract.

As a diuretic, Wild Lettuce helps to promote and increase urine flow and is said to help in cases of urinary tract infections and dropsy (edema), which is the accumulation of fluid in tissues (swelling) or body cavities.

Wild Lettuce is considered an anodyne and has been used to relieve pain, particularly muscular pain and the joint pain of arthritis. It is also thought to relieve painful monthly periods.

Wild Lettuce is said to soothe inflamed mucous membranes and ease the digestive system. It is said to relieve colic.

As an antispasmodic, Wild Lettuce has been used to alleviate cramps, irritating coughs and spasms.

### **Contraindications**

Wild Lettuce should not be used in conjunction with prescription diuretics. The herb may cause drowsiness; however, when used in excess (many times the recommended dosage), it causes restlessness. Overuse (many times the recommended dosage) may cause slow breathing, severe tiredness, passing out, loss of consciousness, or skin rash.

Wild lettuce seems safe for most people in small amounts. Applying wild lettuce directly to the skin can cause irritation. Large amounts can cause sweating, fast heartbeat, pupil dilation, dizziness, ringing in the ears, vision changes, sedation, breathing difficulty, and death.

Do not use wild lettuce if:

- You are pregnant or breast-feeding.
- You have prostate enlargement - benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH).
- You have an eye condition called narrow-angle glaucoma.
- You are allergic to ragweed, marigolds, daisies, or related herbs.
- You are scheduled for surgery in the next two weeks. Wild lettuce might cause excessive se-

dation if combined with medications used during and after surgery.

Sedative medications (medications that cause sleepiness, central nervous system depressants) interact with Wild Lettuce. Wild lettuce might cause sleepiness and drowsiness. Taking wild lettuce along with sedative medications might cause too much sleepiness.

Some sedative medications include clonazepam (Klonopin), lorazepam (Ativan), phenobarbital (Donnatal), zolpidem (Ambien), and others.

## Sources

Dr. A. B. Howard. *Supplement to the copyrighted work Herbal Extracts: Build better health with liquid herbs*. Berkley, MI: Blue Goose Press, 2005. Reprinted under license by Abundant Life Herb Shop.

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