Comfrey Owner's Manual

The Comfrey Owner's Manual

1. What Is Comfrey and Why It’s Underground Gold

Comfrey is one of the most valuable plants you can grow in a backyard or on a homestead, small or large. It's a perennial workhorse with deep roots that mine minerals no other plant can reach, and once it's in the ground, it stays for life. It’s tough, productive, and unusually generous, pumping out biomass, minerals, medicine, and more with almost no maintenance.

Historically, people have called comfrey “knitbone,” and with good reason. Cultures across Europe used it for centuries to heal wounds, reduce inflammation, and even assist with broken bones. It’s also one of the best plants you can grow for compost pile additions, making liquid fertilizer, animal fodder, and improving soil.

Botanical Identity

Comfrey belongs to the borage family, though that’s more a technicality than a useful clue. The variety you want is **Symphytum × uplandicum**, a naturally occurring hybrid between *Symphytum officinale* (common comfrey) and *Symphytum asperum* (prickly comfrey). This hybrid form is sterile, which makes it much safer to grow—it won’t spread by seed and overrun your yard like wild-type comfrey.

The two most trusted strains are **Bocking 4** and **Bocking 14**, both of which were selected and trialed in England during the 1950s by Lawrence D. Hills at the Henry Doubleday Research Association. Out of 21 strains, these two rose to the top for their productivity, nutrient profile, and ease of management.

- **Bocking 14** is ideal for composting and medicinal use
- **Bocking 4** excels as animal fodder due to its digestibility and protein content

Perennial Permanence

Comfrey is a true perennial. Once established, it comes back every year—without fail—and without care. Its roots can reach down six to ten feet or more, which makes it drought-tolerant after the first year. But that same root depth also means you’re not moving it once it’s planted. If you dig up a comfrey plant, any piece of root left behind is capable of regrowing into a full plant and more often than not will. In fact, if you were to try and rototill a comfrey patch you'd just make it angry. The thousands of root pieces generated by this heavy handed approach to destroying it will only produce more comfrey - one plant can become hundreds almost overnight.

Wherever you plant it, it’s permanent.

Useful and Beautiful

Comfrey is a stunner of a plant when mature and in full foliage. It also produces tiny bell-shaped flowers in shades of purple, magenta, coral, and even pale blue. These flowers bloom continuously from late spring through the growing season, attracting bees and pollinators wherever they’re planted. You can even eat the

flowers—they're slightly sweet with a cucumber-like finish, and look great tossed on a salad or plated alongside a roast.

Comfrey doesn't require much. It prefers morning sun and some afternoon shade, especially in hot climates. It grows in USDA zones 3 - 9, and handles everything from loamy garden soil to high-pH alkaline clay. If you have soil that's too poor for vegetables or fruit trees, comfrey might still thrive there—and help build the soil while it's at it.

2. How to Get the Good Stuff

Not all comfrey is the same. If you're going to plant it, you want to be sure you're getting the right kind: the sterile, non-invasive hybrids known as **Bocking 4** and **Bocking 14**. These are the strains that perform reliably, stay put, and give you all the benefits without becoming a problem.

Get your comfrey from ShiShi. He is prompt and reliable. He's an old acquaintance of mine and the person I trust to ship healthy well-handled rootstock. The Bocking 4 he offers actually came from my own plants, back when I was growing comfrey in Texas. I sent him a hundred cuttings. He even paid me in bitcoin for it, and that's what he built his stock from. Now he's propagating those genetics for others. If you're looking to source comfrey from someone who actually understands what he's selling, this is where I'd start. He also accepts Bitcoin if you want to do it that way.

If you want to get started, here's what you need to know:

- **Contact**
  - Best via Nostr: @shishi21m
  - Or on Signal: @shishi21m.34
- **Strains available**
  - **Bocking 4** – better suited for animal fodder
  - **Bocking 14** – good for composting and medicinal use
- **Pricing**
  - $1 per root cutting
  - $20 per full root crown
  - Shipping not included
- Coe's Comfrey is another vendor for comfrey but he only sells Bocking 4
  - http://www.coescomfrey.com/order.html

I highly recommend getting at least 20 root cuttings for each variety you intend to grow. This way you are assured of getting at least a 80% success rate.

Once you've got a few crowns or cuttings in the ground, you won't need to buy comfrey again, ever. It spreads by root but only when you **actively** divide it. The roots themselves don't creep or invade like mint or Bermuda grass. As long as you leave it alone, it stays put. But if you want more, it's easy to propagate from what you grow. Start with both strains if you can. This way you have all the use cases covered.

3. How to Plant, Grow, and Harvest

Comfrey isn't picky, but it rewards good placement and a little bit of care upfront. Once established, it becomes a set-it-and-forget-it perennial. You plant it once, and it'll be there for life—building soil, feeding

pollinators, generating mulch, and producing medicinal biomass with almost no input.

Where It Grows Best

Comfrey thrives in USDA Zones **3 through 9**. It handles cold winters, hot summers, and almost any soil you throw at it—loam, clay, sand, alkaline, acidic. In Canyon, Texas, I grew it in soil with a pH of 8.4. It didn't care. If your soil supports weeds, it'll support comfrey.

That said, pay attention to light and water:

- **Sun**: Morning sun and dappled afternoon shade are ideal, especially in hot climates. Full sun all day in places like Texas will wear it out
- **Water**: Comfrey needs regular water in years one through three. After that, the roots run deep (up to 6 feet), and it becomes drought-tolerant. Although, if you are trying to maximize for biomass production you will want to water it regularly
- **Spacing**: Give each plant room: 2 to 3 feet apart if you're going for a patch. This stuff gets big

How to Plant

You can plant **root crowns** or **root cuttings**. Crowns sprout faster. Root cuttings take longer, but work just as well in the long run. Where you live will determine when you can plant comfrey and realize success. Back in Texas (USDA Zone 6b) I had no problem planting comfrey in September. It is better to start earlier than later but at least wait until all danger of frost has subsided.

- **Root Crowns**: Bury just below the surface. Water well. You'll see growth in 2–3 weeks
- **Root Cuttings**: These are chunks of root the size of your thumb's first knuckle. Bury them horizontally, about 1–2 inches deep. Water, keep the soil moist, and be patient as sprouting can take 2 to 12 weeks depending on zone, season and conditions. If you can mulch the plantings with at least 3 inches of wood chips you will have it easier keeping the area from drying out and that makes a big difference when boot-strapping these plants

Once it's growing, that plant isn't going anywhere. Don't plant it in a spot unless you're okay with it staying there forever.

Plant It Where You Use It

One overlooked advantage of comfrey is how easy it is to **integrate into your existing layout**. Since you're going to be harvesting the leaves multiple times per year—either for mulch, compost, or fertility—don't stick it off in some back corner where you'll forget about it.

Instead, plant it:

- Around fruit trees
- At the base of berry bushes
- Near compost bins
- Along the drip lines of hedgerows
- In mass plantings under solar panels or fencing

Wherever you plant it, you're not just placing a future harvest. You're also placing a **pollinator feeding station**. That's a layer of function most mulch plants don't offer.

When to Harvest

You can harvest comfrey leaves **4 to 8 times a year** (sometimes more), depending on your climate. In cooler zones or wetter years, you'll get more cuts. The plant bounces back fast. I've cut mine to the ground and seen fresh growth pushing up in under two weeks.

Leaves are best harvested once they're full-sized, but before they get leathery. Use a knife or shears and cut the entire plant back to just above the crown. You can use the leaves as:

- **Mulch** (chop and drop)
- **Compost material**
- **Fertilizer tea and concentrate**
- **Wound wraps or poultices**

The flowers don't slow leaf production, so there's no need to cut them off unless you're trying to tidy up. And since Bocking strains don't set seed, there's no risk of spreading.

How to Handle

Some people react to the tiny hairs on comfrey leaves. If you've got sensitive skin, wear gloves and sleeves when harvesting. For me, it's the inside of my forearms that break out, but it clears up fast.

4. How to Make Liquid Fertilizer From Comfrey Leaves

One of comfrey's best tricks is how easy it is to turn into a powerful liquid fertilizer. You don't need to buy anything fancy. Just water, leaves, a container, and a little time.

There are two main methods: **the tea version** and **the concentrated version**. Both work. The one you choose depends on how much comfrey you have, how bad you want it to smell, and how strong you want the end product to be.

Quick Version: Comfrey Tea

This is the easiest way to get started.

What you'll need:

- A barrel, 5-gallon bucket, or drum
- A bunch of chopped comfrey leaves
- Water
- A lid or cover
- (Optional: spigot or drain hole near the bottom)

How to do it:

1. Fill your container with chopped comfrey leaves but don't pack them. Just keep them loose
2. Add water until the leaves are fully submerged

3. Cover it to keep out mosquitoes and rain. Place it in a shady spot outside. Seriously, you do not want this inside your house or very close to your neighbor's house because it does smell rank
4. Wait 3–6 weeks
5. Drain or scoop off the liquid. It will smell awful. That’s normal. Once diluted and applied the smell vanishes

How to use it:

- Apply as a soil drench around plants
- Use full strength, or dilute 1:2 up to 1:10 depending on crop sensitivity
- It can also be used in a sprayer for foliar applications. If you do this then get some paint sprayer bags and strain the liquid as you pour it into the sprayer jug. You run the risk of a clog if you don't

This method creates a mineral-rich brew that delivers potassium, calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, and trace elements right where plants need it—at the root and leaf zones.

Concentrated Version: Comfrey Slurry

This version creates a thick, black, high-strength extract. It smells worse than the tea, much worse but it lasts longer and goes further.

What you’ll need:

- A barrel with a lid and a drain/spigot. You will want to place a screen inside of the bucket or barrel right before the spigot so it doesn't clog when draining off the black gold.
- A way to weigh the leaves down (e.g., a heavy rock)
- Chopped comfrey leaves - Do NOT add water

How to do it:

1. Pack the barrel full of comfrey leaves. Really pack it
2. Add a heavy weight to compress the leaves
3. Cover tightly with a lid and walk away for 6–8 weeks. You will want this to also be in shade and away from neighbors
4. Drain off the thick black liquid that collects at the bottom. It’s slow to build up but potent

How to use it:

- Dilute 1:10 or even 1:15 before applying
- Use as a foliar spray or soil drench
- Avoid applying to plant leaves at anything above 1:10 dilution—it's too concentrated

This version is especially useful when you’ve got more biomass than you know what to do with. Once you’ve drained the concentrate, the spent leaves can go straight to your compost pile or be dried and used as mulch.

Notes and Tips

- Keep both versions **covered**. They smell strong enough to end neighborhood friendships
- Add a fine mesh filter or screen if using a spigot to prevent clogs

- Don’t overapply either version. A little goes a long way
- Label your barrels. You do not want to mistake comfrey extract for anything else

Homemade comfrey fertilizer is a complete fertilizer. It contains nitrogen, potassium, phosphorus, calcium, magnesium, zinc, iron, manganese, selenium, boron, and more. It’s like a soil-level multivitamin.

And it’s free.

5. Nutrient Profile and Scaling

Nutrient Profile

Aside from the "Big 3" Macro nutrients, there is a whole host of micro-nutrients and comfrey delivers big on many of them but let's start at the macro-level (NPK) as a percentage by dry weight of comfrey:

- Nitrogen: 0.75%
- Phosphorus: 0.25%
- Potassium: 0.20%

If you have ever bought a bag of fertilizer the above would be presented as 0.75-0.25-0.2 on the label. But comfrey delivers the entire package as there is more to plant and animal nutrition than just NPK.

Comfrey leaves contain:

186 g/kg crude ash
352 g/kg crude protein (285 g/kg digestible protein)
27 g/kg crude fat
126 g/kg crude fiber
10.8 g/kg calcium (Ca)
Vitamins A, B1, B2, B3, B5, B6, B9, B12, C and E, as well as boron, chromium, cobalt, copper, iodine, iron, magnesium, manganese, selenium, sodium and zinc.

Depending on your soil type, its mineral content, and various other factors your comfrey's nutrient profile will differ but the above is a fair representation of what you can expect from your own endeavors.

Scaling

Comfrey doesn’t multiply, it goes exponential and once you’ve got one healthy plant, you have the potential for hundreds, thousands more. Scaling up your production, whether you’re planting a dozen new spots or converting a whole acre, can really begin with a single plant.

One mature plant can yield **100+ viable cuttings**. That means:

- 1 plant = 100 new plants
- 100 plants = 10,000 new plants
- 1 acre = up to **40–100 tons** of biomass annually

You don’t need to scale all at once. But if you want to turn a garden bed, a swale edge, or even a whole field into a comfrey-producing engine, it’s totally doable. Just start with one—and propagate from there.

Final Notes

- Label your cuttings if you're growing both Bocking 4 and Bocking 14
- Keep new cuttings watered until they sprout
- Don't worry if they disappear over winter. They'll return in spring
- Once established, they're drought-tolerant and nearly impossible to kill

With comfrey, you're never more than one growing season away from having all the mulch, fertilizer, salve material, and animal feed you could possibly need. All you need is the first crown or root and a little time.

Appendix: History, Lore, and Extras

A Bit of Comfrey History

Comfrey has been used by humans for a long, long time. Ancient Greeks and Romans used it to treat wounds, stop bleeding, and even support broken bones. If you get stung by a bee or otherwise molested by mosquitoes, some mashed up comfrey leaves applied to the offended area works wonders. That's where names like *knitbone* and *bone-knit* come from.

Historical figures like **Pliny the Elder** and **Dioscorides** wrote about plants in the borage family (which comfrey belongs to). Pliny lived before the time of Christ, and Dioscorides was a Greek physician in the Roman army. These guys were observing plants centuries before microscopes or soil tests—and they still managed to get a lot right.

One of the earliest recorded mentions of comfrey's broader family even shows up in **Homer's Odyssey**, through a substance called *nepenthe*. It was said to cause forgetfulness when mixed with wine. While that's more connected to borage than comfrey directly, the link is still part of the plant's old-world lore.

The Bocking Strains

The strains you want—**Bocking 4** and **Bocking 14**—trace back to a research project in post-war England.

In the 1950s, **Lawrence D. Hills** established a comfrey trialing program in the village of **Bocking**, near Braintree in the UK. He worked under the guidance of Henry Doubleday's earlier notes and trialed **21 different strains** of comfrey. The result? Bocking 4 and Bocking 14 became the standard-bearers.

Both are sterile hybrids of *Symphytum uplandicum*, and neither produces viable seed. That's important—because wild comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*) spreads aggressively and can take over an area in just a few seasons. Bocking strains stay where you put them. That makes them the practical choice for growers who want the benefits without the chaos.

The Pyrrolizidine Alkaloid Question

Comfrey contains a class of compounds called **pyrrolizidine alkaloids (PAs)**. These show up in a lot of plants and can be toxic to the liver in high doses. Most of the fear around comfrey as animal fodder comes from studies where researchers fed rats absurd quantities—more than they'd ever consume naturally.

The specific comfrey hybrid *Symphytum uplandicum* × *peregrinum* is believed to be **free from PAs**, but most Bocking strains still contain small amounts. That's why it's often labeled "not for internal use" in herbal medicine circles.

Used topically and responsibly, comfrey has an excellent safety record spanning centuries.

Comfrey as Bee Food

You don't have to be a beekeeper to appreciate what comfrey does for pollinators. Once established, comfrey produces **continuous blooms** from late spring through early fall. The flowers are showy and busy with bees flocking to them.

In a time when bee populations are under pressure from habitat loss, pesticides, and disease, giving pollinators access to steady, nutrient-rich forage can make a real difference. Comfrey fills that role well because it flowers profusely and over a long season.

Some growers believe the nectar itself contains medicinal compounds that help bees manage parasites and pathogens. While that's harder to prove, it's easy to observe how often comfrey gets worked over by pollinators, even when other food sources are nearby.

If you're building a homestead ecosystem, or a more productive residential yard, start thinking of comfrey not just as a soil plant—but as part of your bee pantry. And if you're relying on fruit trees, berries, squash, or anything that needs pollination, then comfrey becomes critical infrastructure.

A Note on Overdoing It

Comfrey's productivity is one of its strengths—but it also means you'll eventually have more than you need. That's fine. When you hit that point, you've got options:

- Use excess for **compost**—high nitrogen, loaded with minerals
- Dry and crumble leaves for **winter mulch**
- Share cuttings with neighbors or grow extra to sell

Just don't throw it in the garbage. Comfrey doesn't like being wasted.