

Diploma in Animal Sensory Enrichment

**Plant Assignment Three
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**Stellaria media
(Chickweed)**

by

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Identification and Background Information

Although considered a weed by some *Stellaria media* or chickweed has been used as a culinary plant since the Middle Ages.

Young chickweed has a pleasant, mild, sweet, lettuce like flavour and is ideal as a base green or as an addition to salads.

It can be chopped finely and added to eggs, quiche, pasta sauces and lasagne to provide an extra nutrient boost and added colour.

Chickweed can also be blended raw into smoothies, pesto and sauces as it is extremely versatile. (www.thepracticalherbalist.com)

Medicinally it has soothing and cooling properties and has been used for centuries either as a poultice or an ointment to soothe wounds, ulcers, chilblains, roseola (rose coloured rash) and other skin irritations.

The juice of the plant was previously used in eyewashes and an infusion of the plant was used to alleviate constipation and cure kidney complaints. (Herbs; Roger Phillips and Nicky Foy; Pan Limited 1992).

Stellaria media is the Latin name for chickweed, meaning “**star**” and “**in the midst of**” and when in bloom the tiny white flowers resemble stars in the midst of a sea of green.

It is also known by the alternative names of white bird's eye, star weed, chicken weed, winterwort and scarwort. (www.wildfoodandmedicines.com).

Stellaria media can grow as either a perennial or annual depending on the climate and whilst native to Europe it has become naturalised throughout the world in cool climates.

It is the commonest UK weed and is found growing along stream and river banks, on shingle and coastal cliffs, beside roads, in fields and gardens and on waste ground. (Herbs; Roger Phillips and Nicky Foy; Pan Limited 1992).

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Chickweed is distributed across all soil types but grows more abundantly in lighter soils

and is absent from most acidic soils.

It benefits greatly from a soil with a high potassium content and its presence is an indicator of high nitrogen levels and low levels of phosphate and lime.

This herb thrives in areas of soil disturbance, declining when cultivation ceases for long periods and is sensitive to drought, being one of the first plants to wilt in dry conditions.

(www.gardenorganic.org.uk).

When growing, the plant will sprawl on flat ground, or climb on other plants, reaching a height of 40cm. The growing stems quickly branch and spread, forming distinct mounds of new growth, almost anywhere conditions are favourable.

“Chickweed is an ephemeral (short lived) species and requires only thirteen weeks to flower and set seed. You will continuously see this plant in different places throughout the year and the foliage often appears as a curved domed lime-green mat.”(www.permaculture.co.uk/articles/foraging-wild-food-and-medicinal-plants).

The leaves are bright green in colour, quite small, oval and succulent, with a cordate base and grow down one side of the stem in opposite pairs. A single line of hairs runs down the length of the stem, changing its position where leaves emerge.

The leaves also change position at each node on the stem, creating a criss-cross pattern as you look down the stem and they carry a prominent often whitish mid-vein

(www.wildfoodsandmedicines.com).

Chickweeds flowers arise from the leaf axils, on slender-stemmed and initially pendulous bulbs, before their small but alluring white pin-pricks of star-shaped flowers eventually bloom. These are notable for their five sets of joined petals which gives them the appearance of having ten because each petal is shaped like rabbit-ears and they are approximately 5-8mm in diameter.

Chickweed lives about six weeks but will quickly reseed and create a new crop if the conditions are right.

As the sun gets brighter and the days become warmer it dies back in exposed areas but continues to thrive in moist shady corners.

When the days are shorter and the nights cool again in the autumn, chickweed often makes a lush second appearance.(www.permaculture.co.uk/articles/foraging-wild-food-and-medicinal-plants),(www.wildfoodsandmedicines.com).

Chickweed is available for most of the year but cool spring weather is the ideal climate in which it thrives and it grows rapidly between March and April.

It is best harvested in the newly budded stage as this is when it is at its freshest and tastiest and the vitamin content is high it has not been funnelled into the flowers to promote growth.

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Scissors should be used to remove the new aerial growth and the leaves should be collected in the morning to best preserve chickweed as it wilts extremely easily.

Areas near roads, railways, airports or areas that are sprayed with chemicals should be avoided as the toxins involved destroy the flavour of this herb and should not be ingested, by humans or animals.

If chickweed has gone to seed it tends to have a stringy tough texture and is then too old to be edible.

Chickweed will last in the refrigerator for several days if you wrap it in a damp paper towel or place it in a plastic bag. It fell out of favour with grocery stores due to its intolerance for refrigeration and was replaced with nitrate soaked, plastic packed salads with a longer shelf-life.

Medicinal Properties, Actions and Common Uses

Chickweed has a variety of properties which have proven beneficial in the treatment of both animal and human ailments.

It is both an **expectorant**, a **demulcent** and **mucolytic**.

An expectorant works by telling the body to increase secretions, thereby producing additional lubrication for the irritated respiratory tract

A demulcent is an agent that covers the mucous membranes with a soothing coating and prevents irritation of exposed nerve endings, whilst a mucolytic is an agent that breaks down thick mucus.

“An expectorant increases bronchial secretions and mucolytics help loosen thick bronchial secretions. Expectorants reduce the thickness or viscosity of bronchial secretions thus increasing mucus flow that can be removed more easily through coughing. Mucolytics break down the chemical structure of mucus molecules. The mucus becomes thinner and can be removed more easily through coughing.”

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki

It operates as an **anti-tussive** which means it also capable of relieving and suppressing coughing when required.

Because of the above properties chickweed is therefore extremely effective in treating respiratory complaints and gastrointestinal problems.

It is also **anti-pyretic**, preventing and reducing fevers and works as an **alterative**, gradually curing and restoring health.

It possess **anti-inflammatory** qualities which make it effective against diseases such as rheumatism and arthritis and inflammatory bowel diseases such as Crohn's and ulcerative colitis. (Healing with the Herbs of Life; Lesley Tierra; Crossing Press; 2003).

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Chickweed is an excellent **emollient** when applied topically, actively increasing the skins hydration and making the epidermis or outer layer of skin softer and more pliable.

As a **vulnerary** (wound healer) and **astringent** (causes contraction of skin cells and tissues) chickweed does its best work externally and there are few skin conditions it

cannot help including eczema, psoriasis, ulcers, boils, nettle stings, insect bites, acne, and abscesses, whilst being extremely effective at drawing out splinters and thorns etc.

It has a cooling and drying effect on wounds and skin eruptions and minor burns respond nicely to its care and these properties make it a popular ingredient in salves and lotions.

Chickweed can be administered by means of a fresh plant poultice, infused in olive oil for skin inflammation, as a compress, in tincture form and as a strong infusion added to bath water. (www.wildfoodsandmedicines.com).

Chickweed also has mildly **diuretic** properties and can be supportive during bladder infections. It may help with weight loss as it flushes water weight from stored deposits and also has a **laxative** effect on the body.

(www.permaculture.co.uk/articles/foraging-wild-food-and-medicinal-plants)

Chickweed is a veritable powerhouse of nutrients containing the minerals phosphorous and copper, the flavonoid rutin, which contains quercetin, an antioxidant known to reduce inflammation and strengthen blood vessels, Vitamins B6, B12, D and A and six times more Vitamin C than spinach.

It also contains eighty three times more iron, twelve times more calcium and five times more magnesium than spinach, which is the most mineral rich green readily available to buy over the counter. (www.wildfoodsandmedicines.com).

Another component of chickweed are steroidal saponins, which increase anti-tumour activity in the body therefore reducing cancer risks and are which also effective in lowering elevated cholesterol by preventing the absorption of cholesterol and bile acids via the small intestine.

Chickweed increases the body's ability to absorb nutrients and this along with its high fibre content and high levels of minerals makes it an excellent food for supporting intestinal health. (www.livestrong.com).

Animals can benefit from this herb in much the same way that humans do and it can be fed to horses, cows, pigs and other livestock with confidence.

It can also be given to smaller domestic pets, including dogs cats and rabbits in the form of macerated oil.

Its strongest affinities are with the skin and the digestive tract and it effectively supports the immune system and provides relief for itchy skin.

(Elizabeth Whiter; Certificate in Natural Food Animal Remedies; 2013; page 10 of 28).

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Poultry love chickweed, hence the name and the seeds of this plant used to be popular in bird feed.

Chickweed provides nutritious early sprouts in the spring which act as a tonic for winter-weary flocks and it may be the first and only fresh green available at this time.

The herb is full of trace minerals and over twenty percent of its weight is a viable protein

which serves to revitalize grain fed poultry and is exactly what Spring's new batch of growing chicks crave.

Animals who are caged reared such as mice hamsters lizards and even turtles also enjoy eating fresh chickweed, the silica content being particularly good for those with dull coats and the high fibre content containing mucilage effectively removes toxins from their tiny bodies. (www.thepracticalherbalist.com).

Chickweed will therefore promote healthy respiratory and digestive systems, including mucous membrane health, a strong skeletal system, correctly functioning excretory organs and a healthy coat and skin in all animals.

**Honour the Earth.
Give Glory to the Creator.
Cherish that sweet connection with the plants.
And your medicine power will be deep and strong.**

(Nancy & Michael Phillips; The Herbalist's Way; Chelsea Green Publishing Company 2005).

Learning Outcomes

- 1. Identify and harvest local culinary herbs specific to this course.**
 - 2. How to use fresh and dry herbs for simple remedies**
 3. Equipment needed, drying and storage of herbs.
 4. How to create a herb garden.
 - 5. How to use specific culinary Macerated Oils; Nettle, Marigold, Rose-hip, Mint, Catnip, Chickweed, and Seaweed infused oils and cold pressed Linseed Oil.**
 6. Create delicious, culinary, herbal pet treats specific to this course.
 7. Make simple animal topical preparations such as insect repellent and cooling gel using plants, herbs, clays and honey.
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- 8. Have a clear understanding of what animal self-selection is and how animals can benefit from an enhanced, nutritional, healthy, balanced diet, containing plant material.**
 9. Able to work and communicate with pet owners vets and other healthcare professionals.
 10. How to keep professional standard records of all animal self-selection sessions undertaken.

11. Be aware of the importance of personal and animal safety as well as the relevant insurance, the law and vet liaison.
12. Be able to observe and understand why animals self-select culinary macerated oils/herbs/clays/honey specific to this course at animal rescue centres and with private clients.
13. Be aware of when not to conduct an animal self-selection session.
14. Be more aware of yourself as an animal healer and consider how and when you will use your training and experience from this course.

Bibliography

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