

Herbal Treatment for Seasonal Allergies

New study compares the herb butterbur to an antihistamine

by [Cathy Wong](#)

A recent study published in the January 19 2002 issue of the *British Medical Journal* was a randomized controlled trial comparing the herb butterbur (*Petasites hybridus*) to the antihistamine *cetirizine* in patients with seasonal allergies. One hundred and twenty five patients from four outpatient clinics in Switzerland and Germany participated with 61 receiving butterbur and 64 receiving *cetirizine*. After two weeks, the groups were comparable on measures such as physical and emotional functioning and physician assessment of the symptom severity and overall improvement.

What you need to know:

- Symptoms of seasonal allergies include nasal obstruction, sneezing, clear nasal discharge, headache and itchy, watery eyes. This condition, which occurs during the spring, summer and early autumn and usually lasts for several weeks, is caused by pollens that enter the nasal passages and cause a hypersensitivity reaction. Conventional treatments include oral decongestants, antihistamines, topical steroid sprays and desensitization.
- Butterbur is a perennial shrub that grows in Europe, Asia and North America. It is used primarily for migraine prevention and for chronic cough or asthma.
- The main active constituents are petasin and isopetasin which are believed to reduce smooth muscle spasm and have an anti-inflammatory effect. Butterbur also contains pyrrolizidine alkaloids which are associated with liver toxicity and carcinogenesis and considered unsafe. Extracts are available in which the pyrrolizidine alkaloids have been removed.
- Butterbur is often not the first complementary and alternative (CAM) treatment used for seasonal allergies such as hayfever. In fact, butterbur is in the same botanical family as ragweed and could theoretically trigger an allergic reaction.
- Other CAM treatments for seasonal allergies include: [nettle leaf](#), [quercetin](#), [nasal wash](#), [homeopathy](#) and [acupuncture](#).

Butterbur

Botanical: *Petasites vulgaris* (DESF.)

Family: N.O. Compositae

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---**Synonyms**---Langwort. Umbrella Plant. Bog Rhubarb. Flapperdock. Blatterdock. Capdockin. Bogshorns. Butter-Dock.

---**Part Used**---Root.

The Butterbur, a plant nearly allied to the Coltsfoot - being the *Tussilago petasites* of Linnaeus - is found in wet ground, lowlying, marshy meadows and by riversides, but is usually local.

---Description---It has a fleshy, stout root-stock, extensively creeping, which, like the Coltsfoot, sends up the flowers before the leaves appear. The flower-heads are, however, not produced singly, on separate stalks, but in crowned clusters in a dense spike, with many bracts interspersed, at the summit of a round, thick flower-stalk, 4 inches to a little over a foot in height, which first appears at the end of February or beginning of March, and is generally of a purplish hue.

There are two kinds of flowers - the male or stamen-bearing and the female or seedproducing - as a rule on different spikes, the female flowers being in denser, longer spikes than the male flowers, which are in shorter, loose clusters. Occasionally a few female flowers are found on the male spikes, and a few male flowers on the female spikes. The corollas are pale reddish purple or fleshcoloured, bell-shaped in the male flowers, and containing abundant nectar, but only threadlike in the female flowers, which contain no nectar, and are succeeded by the white feathery pappus, which crowns the seeds.

In April, as the flowers begin to decay, the leaves appear. They are on stout hollowed channelled foot-stalks, and when full grown very large - the largest leaves of any plant in Great Britain - the blade sometimes attaining 3 feet in diameter. It is roundish, heartshaped at the base, scalloped at the edges, with the portion between the projections finely toothed. The leaves are white and cobwebby with down both above and below when young, but when mature, most of the covering disappears from the upper surface though the leaves still remain grey and more or less downy beneath.

The name of the genus, *Petasites*, is derived from *petasos*, the Greek word for the felt hats worn by shepherds, and familiar to us in representations of Mercury, in reference to the large size of the leaves, which could be used as a head-covering. No other vegetation can live where these leaves grow, for they exclude light and air from all beneath, and where the plant abounds, it has been described as 'the most pernicious of all the weeds which this country produces.'

The name Butterbur is supposed to have been given it because formerly these large leaves were used to wrap butter in during hot weather. 'Lagwort' is an old name we sometimes find for it, in reference to the leaves delaying their appearance till after the flowers have faded, though once the leaf-shoots make a start, they grow with almost tropical luxuriance.

'The early flowering of this rank weed,' Hooker writes, 'induces the Swedish farmers to plant it near their beehives. Thus we see in our gardens the bees assembled on its affinities, *P. alba* and *P. fragrans*, at a season when scarcely any other flowers are expanded.'

In Germany an old name for the plant was *Pestilenzewurt*, but one finds really very little either of evil or good assigned by the older writers to the Butterbur as compared with

most other herbs. The old German name was given it, not as suggesting the plant was provocative of pestilence, but as an indication of its value as a remedy in time of such calamity (Henslow).

Anne Pratt says the former name of this plant was the 'plague-flower,' as it gained a successful reputation among the few remedies during the time of that malady. Lyte, in his *Herbal*, 1578, calls it 'a sovereigne medicine against the plague', and remarks of its leaves that 'one of them is large enough to cover a small table, as with a carpet,' and they are often 2 feet in width. Under its ample foliage, the poultry in farm meadows, shelter themselves from the rain, or find a cool retreat from the noonday sun. The Swedish farmers plant it in great quantities near their beehives, as bees are attracted by its flowers.

The seeds in some parts of the country have been used for love divination.

'The seeds of butterdock must be sowed by a young unmarried woman half an hour before sunrise on a Friday morning, in a lonesome place. She must strew the seeds gradually on the grass, saying these words:

I sow, I sow!
Then, my own dear,
Come here, come here,
And mow and mow!