

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Common plantain plantago major is a favorite of natural foragers, including humans, young leaves are used in salads and stews. Photo: Author.

Plantain Pair

Common and English plantain are early transports to the Americas; the latter will be remembered from a game in childhood.

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

Some local plants give us clues about the early colonization of America. *Saponaria officinalis*, or bouncing bet / Sweet William, is one such species. If you see it in a remote wooded area, often you will also find a foundation indicating an old homestead or ghost town of the Pinelands. Sweet William is a native of Europe and people used it for soap and shampoos, so you can understand the rationale for bringing its seeds to the New World.

Like Sweet William, a number of plants have been introduced to areas purposely, while others have simply hitched rides in the bilges of boats and in grain shipments or have arrived via sand storms, across oceans, and through a host of other methods. These are exotics, many of which are invasive and take over at the expense of native species. Some of the better-known undesirable exotics include kudzu, English ivy, Japanese honeysuckle, oriental bittersweet, bamboo, stilt grass, to name only a few.

Our subject plants for today tend to aggravate those who strive for the perfect plastic lawn: these are two local plantains. Common plantain or *plantago major* was brought to the New World by the Puritans. In fact the Native Americans called it

Englishman's foot because in areas that are disturbed it becomes prevalent. Native Americans used it in their remedies much the same way that colonists had in their homelands of Europe.

Its adaptation to compacted soils and its resilience to being trampled have made it important to soil rehabilitation. Not only do its roots break up densely packed earth but it also helps prevent erosion. However there are native plants that perform the same function.

Common plantain or *plantago major* is native to Eurasia. Its leaves are broad and heavily ribbed, with troughlike stems. It flowers from June – October with greenish-white to greenish-brown spikes. To me the flower seems very inconspicuous.

It is an edible plant; the young leaves are eaten raw in salads. But as the plant gets older they become stringier and are more likely to be cut, boiled, and put in stews if they are used at all.

Northeastern tribes (e.g., Cherokee) used its leaves in a tea for washing sore eyes. Foster and Duke (see sources) speak of it as a prominent cancer folk cure in Latin America. Grain shipments, especially cereal grains, commonly have plantain seed mixed in and

thus it has attained a worldwide distribution. Not surprisingly it also has worldwide folk medicinal uses. Its antimicrobial properties have been confirmed as stimulating the healing process.

Ethnobotanist Daniel Moerman has compiled a long list of uses by Native Americans. Poultices made from the leaves of this plant were typically applied to feet for rheumatism and swelling, and also used for burns, dermatological aids, wounds, contusions, coughs, blisters, ulcers, insect stings, gastrointestinal ailments, headaches, snakebites and more – the list seems endless. Most remedies related to gastrointestinal, dermatological, respiratory, and gynecological problems.

I'm in no way suggesting that you purposely grow our two subject species, Common and English plantain, but I think their history and uses should be appreciated, since they're here, prevalent, and have cultural context.

Both are most commonly found in laissez-faire lawns and roadsides. I suspect as a child you have played with our second subject species plantain – *plantago lanceolata*, more commonly called English plantain / narrowleaf plantain. The game involves wrapping the distal stem around the flower's head and drawing back the stem,

causing the flower's head to snap off and project forward – a child's harmless projectile. But in a child's imagination it was a bullet of sorts. I wish life were still that simple for children. Edinburgh Castle's One O'clock Gun (see photographs and caption) has lent its name to this game in Scotland.



Bottom: A child's game with narrow leaf plantain, is called One O'Clock Gun in Scotland.



The game's name is taken from the firing of the One O'clock Gun at Edinburgh Castle, a daily event that dates back to 1861 when Scottish businessman John Hewat was inspired when a gun fired at noon in Paris allowed people to sync their timepieces. He decided the Scottish capital needed something similar. At one time, ships in the Firth of Fourth estuary set their maritime clocks by the report of the gun. The gun is still fired at 1 p.m. each day, with the exception of Sundays, Good Friday and Christmas Day.

The finely-toothed leaves of narrow leaf plantain are markedly different than common plantain. These are basal leaves in a clustered rosette. They are thin and long; they can flop or be erect. Their flower or inflorescence sits atop a single leafless stalk and is shaped like an ovoid spike encircled with tiny flowers or *spikelet inflorescence*. This plantain is also edible.



Plantago lanceolata is known by many common names: English plantain, narrowleaf plantain, narrow-leaved plantain, black jack, black plantain, buckhorn, buckhorn plantain, buckhorn ribgrass, common plantain, German psyllium, hen plant, jackstraw, lamb's tongues, lance leaf plantain, long plantain, narrow leaf ribwort, rat tail, rib grass, ribwort, ripple grass, small plantain, snake plantain and wild sago. This is why scientific names become so important, they provide a universal identification system. Photo Author

Like its relative it derives from Eurasia. There is evidence of its being present in Europe back to Early Neolithic times – essentially 10,000 BC.

Narrow leaf also has a rich history of medicinal uses. A number of sources suggest it is the mucilage, silicic acid, and tannin properties of the plants that give them therapeutic properties. The seeds of these herbs have soothing effects. A long list of traditional uses for the plant can be found at www.healthbenefitstimes.com. It has antibacterial properties; taken internally it has been used for diarrhea, gastritis, peptic ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome, hemorrhage, hemorrhoids, cystitis, bronchitis, catarrh, sinusitis, asthma, cough, colds, and hay fever. The consumption of the *plantago lanceolata* seeds may reduce cholesterol levels in the blood. Externally they have been used for blisters, sores, ulcers, swelling, insect stings, earaches, and eye ailments.

Nutritional values are complex; they are high in calcium, magnesium. and phosphorus. A

word of caution: self-treatment using natural plants has risks, since their chemistry can be strong or can disagree with your system. There is also the risk of misidentification. We share these properties not to promote their use but to provide cultural awareness.

Plantain also supports a number of moths and butterflies. Lepidopterist David Wagner lists common buckeye, giant leopard moth, and orange virbia as species using plantains, further suggesting that those rearing butterflies might include plantain as a food option. Others mention the agreeable tiger moth and Glanville fritillary. The buckeye's caterpillars ingest the leaves, which contain iridoid glycosides and thus make themselves unpalatable to predators.

(By the way, these plants should not be confused with the plantain species of banana whose name derives from the Spanish word plátano meaning "plane tree" or "banana tree.")

Maybe after you read this you'll be inspired to teach a child how to have fun playing One O'Clock Gun, or fire off a shot yourself to remember days gone by!

Sources

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