

From the Potting Bench

Yarrow

Recently, I was transplanting delicate yarrow seedlings into larger containers at the FOSC nursery. An erudite, nursery colleague, Alan, asked what I was working on and told me that the mythic Greek hero Achilles used the plant to treat wounds during the Trojan War. That out-of-the-ordinary input really caught my attention. While all native plants are worthy, some come with an enhanced ancestry worth looking into. First, how did *Achillea millefolium* come to be associated with Achilles and second, just what are yarrow's medicinal properties for it to have such a unique pedigree?



Yarrow at the nursery.

While Linnaeus formally named the plant in the 18th century, it was known in Greek and Roman antiquity and first documented for medicinal properties by Dioscorides around 50-70 CE. The early focus seems to be on the species name, *millefolium*, for the profusely feathered leaves. However, early commentators connected the plant with use on the battlefield and one common name was herba militaris. And this takes us back to Achilles. While not usually known for his gentle side, the hero is referred to in the Illiad as having knowledge of “soothing herbs of healing power.” The Trojan War as rendered by Homer was a particularly bloody affair. One scene depicts an arrow wound treated with herbs with a nod to Achilles as the source of the healing knowledge. Whether the herb was yarrow is not known with any scholarly certainty, but it works for our purposes. Notwithstanding, Achilles has come down to us through the millennia as associated with the healing properties of yarrow. But just what are they?



Yarrow in the wild.

Many sources list yarrow's beneficial properties, and it comes off as quite a wonder drug. Apart from uses in Eurasia, Native Americans used yarrow for any number of conditions and ailments. Leaves were used to concoct a salve to treat wounds (including arrow and gunshot), sores, and to stanch blood flow. The Coast Miwok at Point Reyes used the herb for rattlesnake bites. Taken internally as a tea, the plant was used to remedy headache, stomach distress, and colds. Other treatable ailments include arthritis, toothaches, and menstrual pain. One source called yarrow a “sauna in a bottle” as it induces sweating. One wonders if modern medicine has seized on yarrow's versatility?

So, a friendly observation from Alan sent me off into a fascinating inquiry into the classics and ethnobotany. So maybe you might want to take yarrow with you in your first aid kit when going out in the wild. Be prepared.

—Peter Van der Naillen,
FOSC Native Plant Nursery Volunteer