

Simple Things

The purple coneflower, *Echinacea purpurea*, like its eight sister species, originates in eastern and central North America. This tall plant bears conical or rounded flower heads whose mainly orange or reddish tubiflora call to mind the little spines of hedgehogs.

The coneflower was one of the most important medicinal plants of the Native American tribes of the eastern part and prairies of North America – in particular the Lakota Sioux, Cheyenne, Omaha, Kiowa and Comanche.

Its many potential applications were chronicled by European immigrants, traders and trappers, and later, in the early 20th century by ethnobotanists, too. For example, the coneflower was used as a versatile painkiller for the treatment of sore throats, stomach and toothache, as an anti-inflammatory drug for injuries and poorly-healing wounds, for the treatment of blood poisoning, snakebites and rabies, for all symptoms that may be associated with flu or colds, for the treatment of skin infections and as a tonic for pox infections.

Chewed or squashed roots – for example, in poultices – chewed leaves or tea made from fresh petals, leaves and roots were used.

And evidently with great success: the botanist Prof. Kelly Kindscher (of the University of Kansas) was able to demonstrate that the plant was used by 19 tribes of prairie Native Americans alone as well as by many other tribes in the east and south-east of the present-day USA.

As long ago as 1805, the explorers Lewis and Clark sent the roots and seeds of this medicinal plant to the then President, Thomas Jefferson – which was remarkable because, according to Kindscher, such treatment was afforded only to wares of “the very highest scientific or economic value”. And it is with good reason that *echinacea* continues to be used today by the original inhabitants of North America (among others).

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