

# Common Yarrow

Achillea millefolium L.  
Achillée millefeuille



*Used in over 20 pharmaceutical products,  
common yarrow is a popular medicinal plant in Canada.*

## Plant Properties and Uses

### Medicinal

Common yarrow is an extensively used medicinal plant in Canada. It is found in about 20 pharmaceutical products. Used mainly in poultices and healing lotions, it also relieves various gastrointestinal complaints (cramps, nausea, diarrhea, flatulence, inflammation). Common yarrow stimulates the appetite and strengthens the body. It is also said to be effective against nervous disorders, menstrual pain, fever and colds. Its essential oil is used in aromatherapy.

### Culinary

The highly aromatic leaves and flowers are made into a herbal tea. Fresh leaves can be used as a substitute for sage in recipes.

### Ornamental

Common yarrow is a popular ornamental plant and there are numerous attractive cultivars available in several colours. It is also used in dry form for decorative purposes. In Europe, it used to be planted with thyme and camomile to obtain attractive lawns more resistant to dryness than ordinary grass.

### Other Uses

Common yarrow can be used as a blue dye in medications and food colouring. It is also added to many cosmetic and beauty products. In certain areas, it is used to reduce shore and slope erosion. It is also used by honey bees.

**WARNING:** Common yarrow can cause skin and allergic reactions in individuals who are already sensitive to plants in the composite family (rain fern, burdock, dandelion, etc.). Large doses and extended use should be avoided. Not recommended for pregnant women and epileptic patients. The substance might also interfere with antacids, hypotensors and hypertensors, as well as anticoagulants.

### Habitat

Common yarrow is widespread in the Gaspé and throughout Quebec. It grows in various habitats, such as fields, shores, salt marshes, sand dunes, outcrops, tundra and high mountain meadows, along roadsides and in woodlands. It is not very shade tolerant, but grows well on poor, dry and rocky soils.

### Market

#### Industrial Demand

The world production of *Achillea millefolium* essential oil is 800 tonnes annually, estimated to have a value of U.S.\$88 million. It seems that the global yarrow market is well-developed in Europe. However, Richters Herb Catalogue states that the flower market is limited and that special equipment would be required to be competitive on the international market.

Certain Maghreb<sup>1</sup> countries are major competitors on the chamazulene (blue colouring) market. They grow a

<sup>1</sup> Name given to the group of countries located in northwestern Africa: Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania.

related species called feverfew, and produce chamazulene at a lower cost. Therefore, there is a strong competition for this product.

As for dry flowers, some herbalists must buy them outside the province because they cannot obtain the desired quality in Quebec, except in small amounts. It is more tedious to deal with several people than with only one producer. In Quebec, there are opportunities to develop yarrow production if a producer or a group of producers could supply a relatively large and standardized amount.

In Quebec, the annual production of dried organic flowers is 100 kg, with an annual growth rate of about 15%. In 2003, the price per kilogram was \$16.50 and one kg of yarrow essential oil sold for approximately \$2,583.

### ***Harvesting Method***

Yarrow flowers are harvested when in full bloom, from June to September, before their centres turn brown. Stems must be cut approximately 2 cm below the flowers.

Harvesting is done by hand for the herbalist market, but can be done mechanically for essential oil production. Essential oil extraction does not require the same quality as the herbalist market.

Leaves harvested for seasoning must be collected in the morning, after the dew evaporates and before the main heat of the day. They should preferably be harvested before flowering.

### ***Product Quality***

Like all other medicinal plants, yarrow should be dried in an appropriate dryer, preferably away from the light. The flowers must not be too old, i.e. their centres must not have turned brown yet. Yarrow is a plant that dries quite easily because of its low water content.

If it is to be used for decorative purposes, yarrow must be dried in small bunches and hung in a dry, ventilated area.

The leaves, used as a substitute for sage, are dried in the shade, just like the flowers, in a well-ventilated area. They are then placed in an airtight container and kept in

a cool, dark place to preserve their properties.

Wild Canadian common yarrow appears to have a higher percentage of chamazulene than species grown in other countries.

### ***Contacts and Buyers***

The yarrow market is currently underdeveloped in the Gaspé Peninsula. The main medicinal plant market is in major cities. In the Gaspé Peninsula, such products are bought by organic food stores. There is one in Gaspé and one in New Richmond. In the Gaspé Peninsula, the Coopérative de solidarité du Rocher-Percé in Val-d'Espoir can be reached at (418) 782-2777. Many herbalists in the region have valuable knowledge of Gaspé Peninsula plants. Their contact information is available from the Union des producteurs agricoles at (418) 392-4466.

Regarding culinary uses for common yarrow, upscale restaurants and health food cafés should be contact first. Specialty grocery stores are another good alternative.

Information about essential oil production is available from medicinal plant distilleries. There are several in Quebec, including one in Gaspé and one in Grondines.

### ***Domestication***

Common yarrow production can be carried out on fallow land, old pastures and old meadows. It adapts to practically all types of soils, as long as they are well-drained and exposed to the sun.

Seedlings should be planted in May or transplanted around mid-June. Rhizomes can also be transplanted (4 cm deep). A space of 45 cm should be left between rows, and 90 cm between seedlings. Seeds will sprout after two weeks if planted in direct sun. The germination rate is generally high. Approximately 24,000 seedlings, or 10 kg of seeds, can be planted per hectare.

It is important to choose cultivars carefully, since there are climatic variations and divergences in active principle concentration. Nurseries and gardening centres can provide advice in this matter.

Planted seedlings will produce a tough bow in their first year of growth. In the following season, the plant will grow high enough to produce flowers.

Fertilizing with an adequate amount of ripe compost should be sufficient. Seedling thinning should be carried out at the end of the third year.

Cutting seedling tops after the first harvest may cause them to bloom again towards late September. This occurs in Europe, but no test seems to have been carried out in the Gaspé Peninsula to verify this information.

Yarrow species with white or red flowers are thought to be more medically active than those with yellow or orange flowers.

In 2003, Quebec's organic medicinal plant network, the Filière des plantes médicinales biologiques, prepared a technical handbook on yarrow mainly covering aspects of the plant's growth.

## Useful References

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## Web Sites

ALBERTA AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT:

<http://www.agric.gov.ab.ca/economic/market/herbsarticle.html#13>

FILIÈRE DES PLANTES MÉDICINALES BIOLOGIQUES DU QUÉBEC: <http://www.plantesmedicinales.qc.ca/>

LE RÉSEAU PROTÉUS. *Portail santé de médecine intégrée:*

<http://www.reseauproteus.net/proteus.htm>

RICHTERS HERB SPECIALISTS:

<http://www.richters.com>

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