

*Arctium lappa* L.

great burdock



Left—arrangement of heads at the summit of stem. Right—rosettes of early season leaves.

*Arctium lappa* is a distinctive composite originating from Europe (i.e., it is not native to North America). It is found as a weed of disturbed and cultivated soils, such as roadsides, fields, and pasture edges. It has large lower leaves that have a cordate (i.e., heart-shaped) base and coating of white, woolly hairs on the lower blade surface. The heads have purple flowers that are arranged inside bur-like bracts. The flowers begin to appear in late July and flower for much of the remaining summer. The individual bracts are hooked at the tip and attach to clothing, hair, and fur for animal transport of the fruits. *Arctium lappa* is recognized from its closely related species by the flat-topped array of heads that are each 2.5–4.5 cm across. A very common species, *Arctium minus* (common burdock), has arrays of heads that are not at all flat-topped (i.e., the lower stalks of the heads are comparatively short, creating an array that is taller than wide) and each head is 1.5–2.5 cm across. Both species have similar uses.



Roots of *Arctium minus*, a related and common species.

In the early season, the taproots of *Arctium* can be dug and can be eaten raw or cooked (e.g., boiled or roasted). They are located by searching for the expanding basal leaves. The taproots can be very long, and taste like a cross between potatoes and carrots (i.e., like a bland carrot). They contain a high proportion of inulin, a carbohydrate with many health benefits that is easily assimilated by diabetics. The taproots soon begin to develop a woody core and become less desirable as an aerial stem is produced. In general, roots dug prior to mid-May are excellent. After this, one must wait until the fall (October and November) for the new rosettes of leaves to

be formed, which indicate the position of the pleasant, starchy taproots. The young leaves are also an acceptable pot herb, but become bitter very quickly. Cooking in several changes of water can help remedy the flavor. Both the young shoots and young petioles (i.e., leaf stalks) can also be eaten raw in salads or cooked briefly. Both are best if the outer layer is removed so as to expose the juicy core.

*Arctium lappa* (and *Arctium minus*) is useful for treating skin and scalp maladies, particularly those that manifest as dry, flaky or scaly, patches. Treatment is best effected by imbibing the decocted root several times a day. The root (as well as other parts of the plant) contain several polyphenals referred to as lignans (e.g., arctigenin, arctiin, matairesinol). A poultice of the fresh root applied to the affected areas can be used in conjunction with the decoctions, as well the decoction itself can also be used as an external wash. Preparations of *Arctium* are also an alterative (i.e., restoring vitality and proper functioning to the body, often by eliminating wastes). The teas are believed to act on the kidneys to support their function. The standard dosage for decoctions is one tablespoon of dried, crushed root boiled for 10 minutes, taken three times a day. The fresh leaves can also be poulticed for treatment of minor skin ailments (e.g., eczema, sores, wounds). They have been shown to have antimicrobial activity, probably due to the presence of polyacetylenes (similar to the roots). Ingestion of the taproots also serves as a carminative (i.e., removing gas from the digestive system).

The heads of *Arctium* serve well as a temporary fastener for clothing, should a button or tie have been lost or damaged. The bur-like series of bracts work similar to other hook-and-loop attachments (e.g., Velcro).