

NOT JUST A LOAD OF OLD COBBLERS ... PEGS

Patrice investigates some potential health applications for this introduced species that loves to colonise disturbed or vacant land.

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THEY pop up everywhere, don't they? As soon as you disturb the earth, the seed bank factory is stimulated into mass production, and up come the Cobbler's Pegs. We made the city to country change a couple of years ago, and the forty acre property where we hope to build one day is plentifully endowed with weeds, Lantana of course, plus milkweed, Patterson's Curse, African grasses, velcro weed, and the ubiquitous *Bidens pilosa*, or Cobbler's Peg.

Well, I got to thinking I wished I had a dollar for every cobbler we found. It has to be good for something, I thought. So I looked it up on the PubMed website, and blow me down, it is! Now I'm in two minds whether I regard it as a revolting weed or a fantastic herb. Of course it is a weed in many areas, particularly tropical regions where it can out-compete native species.

Cobbler's Peg has uses in bioremediation. It's an accumulator of heavy metals, particularly cadmium, so it can be used as a sustainable and non-polluting way of remediating a toxic site. The only problem comes in harvesting and disposing of the weed, but as it could be buried, that seems to me to be much better than using heavy machinery that chomps through fossil fuels, releasing carbon in an effort to relocate polluted soils. All that effort and they just change the location of the problem.



ABOVE: THE PURPLE-TINGED LEAVES INDICATE A HIGH LEVEL OF ANTIOXIDANTS.

RIGHT: YELLOW AND WHITE FLOWERS AND PINNATE LEAF-STRUCTURE ARE CHARACTERISTIC OF THE *BIDENS PILOSA*.

Kapow Salad

(Serves three)

1 nice organic/hydroponic open-hearted lettuce or Pak choi

1 freshly picked organic Cobbler's Peg plant (use 4-8 of the best leaves)

2 carrots

3-5 shallots

1 red capsicum

Any other raw salad veg you might fancy

1 lemon (juiced)

Best quality extra-virgin olive oil (about 2-3 tablespoons)

2 cloves garlic

Fresh herbs of your choice

Teaspoon mustard

Your choice of diced sundried tomatoes or olives or pickled cucumbers

Your choice of protein (fish/meat/hardboiled eggs/tofu etc.)



USE THE BEST YOUNG LEAVES IN A DELICIOUS SIDE-SALAD.

Grate the carrot, dice the capsicum, slice up the shallots and rip up the washed greens. Finely chop the herbs, then crush the garlic, juice the lemon, splosh in the olive oil and toss it all up into the salad. Chop up the protein, and mix it all up into the salad. Garnish with sesame or chia seeds, or chopped basil or coriander. Serve in an attractive bowl, and feel energised, knowing that you're eating a weed and it's doing you good.

But it was in health research that Cobbler's Peg is the big news. For many years, *Bidens pilosa* has been used as a green vegetable in third world countries, as well as a folk medicine with very wide application. Wounds, colds and flu, fever, hepatitis and jaundice, glandular sclerosis, rheumatic conditions, neuralgia, smallpox, colic, diarrhoea, pain, swelling, snake bite, conjunctivitis, anaemia, haemorrhage and rectal prolapse, are just a few of many traditional uses of this herb.

It's a good vegetable, high in calcium, iron and other minerals, antioxidants, phytonutrients and fibre. As long as it's harvested from clean soil, away from roads or any pollution, you have a healthy and free source of greens. It's also not unattractive; the young leaves are bright green, and it gradually gets purpley-brownish tinges. Purple is always a good sign for finding antioxidants, the super-healthy sort you get in berries. I tried it in our lunchtime salad, and a few fresh leaves chopped in among the lettuce aren't noticeable. It's got quite a bitter taste so it will stimulate digestion in the same way as rocket.

Perfectly good in small amounts, and it can also be steamed.

Now the big guns have got onto researching Cobbler's Peg over the last ten years, and found that it has some pretty amazing benefits. In short, there are high-quality research papers which show, (at least among mice, rats and cultured human cell lines), that *Bidens pilosa* can be anti-cancer, anti-malarial, anti-diabetic, anti-microbial and even anti-herpes simplex. Many of these studies were prospective in nature, but they show a lot of promise for further evaluation of health benefits for humans.

If you want to learn more, a simple search on PubMed using the term *Bidens pilosa* will find lots of studies, and some of them are free to download and read, although many are highly technical.

So, here's a suggestion for using your Cobbler's Peg more productively than as a recipient of herbicides. Of course, you need to remember to harvest it from an area where you're sure the soil is clean.