Leonurus japonicus **Houttuyn**

Lamiaceae
Source of: yì mǔ cǎo, chōng wèi zǐ 益母草, 茺蔚子
Japanese motherwort herb, seed

Summary Description

L. heterophyllus and *L. artemisia* are synonyms. There is no North American analog species; the common "weed" in our gardens is *L. cardiaca*, the European species. Material labeled *L. heterophyllus* commercially available in the U.S. seems to be a different form, with coarser basal leaves and a darker green color. *L. japonicus* is a full sun biennial, hardy to Zone 4, which tolerates some shade and will naturalize. The plant forms a large basal clump in its first year, then in its second year can grow to 6 feet tall. The species has distinctive, highly-divided, feathery blue-green leaves with reddish-purple flowers in the leaf axils, as well as the characteristic motherwort scent. The small, smooth brown seeds (nutlets) have a distinctive shape with three corners.

Propagation

Sow seeds thinly in 72-cell trays, cover lightly with potting medium and press down, use bottom heat and keep moist. Seeds should germinate in 7-14 days. Thin to one seedling per cell.

Cultivation

Different plants are grown for leaf and seed. Plant at a 12-18 inch radius. Benefits from compost; plants grown in fertile soil will be very tall and leafy. Motherworts seem to cross-pollinate freely. If you are harvesting seed as a product or for future propagation, do not grow more than one species at a time and be sure to eradicate the European weed.

Harvest & Processing

A high quality product consists of leaves stripped from the stem in July of the second year, before the plant starts to flower. According to Bensky, tests show the leaves are more active medicinally than the stalks. Under good conditions, a second-year plant may self-sow in autumn. These small basal clumps may be harvested and dried whole, as the prized "child leonurus" tóng zǐ yì mǔ cǎo considered to be the best quality. Lay the leaves or clumps flat on a tray, in a single layer. Dry with maximum airflow and temperatures below 110°F. Do not over-dry; the material should be green, soft and in whole form. Brittleness and shattering are signs of overdrying. For seed harvest, cut whole stalks and invert into a clean 55-gallon plastic barrel, shake or beat the stalks until most of the seeds come off, then put the stalks aside for compost. Fully ripe seeds will shatter easily.

References

Flora of China: http://www.efloras.org/florataxon.aspx?flora_id=2&taxon_id=210000972
Bensky *Materia Medica* page: 614, 616

Alternate species

L. sibiricus, heterophyllus f. leucanthus, turkestanicus, macranthus

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L. japonicus grow-out ready for harvest second year before flowering

L. sibiricus is skinny but floriferous

Material known as L. heterophyllus has a coarse basal leaf

L. cardiaca above
L. japonicus below

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