

The Herb Society of America's

Notable Native™ Herb 2025

Prunella vulgaris Linnaeus



Prunella vulgaris var. *lanceolata*. Photo courtesy Jim Conrad.¹

Family: Lamiaceae (Mint Family)
Latinized Name: *Prunella vulgaris* Linnaeus
Common Names: Self-heal, Heal-all
Growth: Perennial
Habitat: Meadows, pasturelands, open woodlands, roadsides
Light: Full sun to Full shade
Soil: Slightly acidic, moderately moist, well-draining
Water: Moderate rainfall, tolerates drought

CONSERVATION STATUS:
G5—Secure [NatureServe Explorer]

HISTORY



Prunella is a genus of 4-7 species found worldwide, 4 of them appearing in the U.S.:

Prunella vulgaris Linnaeus
Common Self-heal

Native to lower 48 states and Alaska.

Prunella vulgaris L. ssp. *lanceolata* (W. Bartram) Hultén
Lanceleaf Self-heal. Native to the lower 48 states and Alaska.

Prunella vulgaris L. ssp. *aleutica* (Fernald) Hultén
Aleutian Self-heal
Native to the Aleutian Islands, US.

Prunella vulgaris ssp. *laciniata*
Cutleaf Self-heal. Introduced in NY, MS, PA, OH, VA, NC, GA

Theophrastus (c. 371–287 BCE), now recognized as the father of botany, included *Prunella* in his writings culminating in *Historia Plantarum*.

As Dioscorides was compiling his famed book of medicinal plants, *De Materia Medica*, in the first century A.D., *Prunella vulgaris* had long

been in use for its medicinal properties.

If you are a gardener or a wanderer in meadows, fields, and forests, it is unlikely that you have not encountered it. There are many who would count it among unwanted “weeds,” generally when appearing in gardens or lawns.

In spite of its occasional rambunctious spreading, it has much to offer for those will look a little closer.

DESCRIPTION

Prunella vulgaris, commonly known as Self-heal or Heal-all, is a diminutive plant species that is spread widely across temperate areas of the globe. It is native to North America, appearing in all 50 states.

At its best in open woodlands, it is often overlooked because of neighboring plants towering over them.

Generally growing in the range of 3” to 10” tall, it scrambles across the earth by means of rhizomes, reaching up with stalks bearing lavender blue to deep violet and occasionally white flowers from April to September, depending on latitude and elevation.



Left: *P. vulgaris*

Right: *P. vulgaris* var. *lanceolata*

There are 2 primary species in North America:

Prunella vulgaris and *Prunella vulgaris* var. *lanceolata*. In the Family Lamiaceae they have the expected 4-sided stems and opposite leaves. A possible third species, *P. vulgaris* ssp. *vulgaris*, is reported mostly in the southeast U.S., but is in need of further research before declaring it native as opposed to introduced.

HABITAT

Early in the year, before grasses and other plants grow tall, you may find *Prunella* along trails, roadsides, or on abandoned patches of land. They appear in sunny or shady spaces, but do need some sun everyday.

They will self-seed to form a groundcover in full sun and reasonable moist soil, and often appear in lawns, where they first earn a reputation as a weed, and admittedly, they

do appear in many weed books. If you want to see them at their best, give them a little extra water or shade during drought conditions.

Whether you want to keep them or not, do appreciate their beauty and marvel at their many medicinal and culinary uses.

PROPAGATION

P. vulgaris ssp. *vulgaris* is a low growing plant, from 2” to 10” tall, and sometimes creeping along the ground. The stolons send roots down and can be cut off and removed to plant elsewhere. Seeds can be collected in late Fall, and held over the winter in a cool place, then planted in early Spring.

The seed can be slow to germinate, so don’t skip the stratification step. They also persist in the soil for up to five years.

POLLINATORS

Prunella attracts a number of common pollinators, and is the host plant for the Clouded Sulfur butterfly. Among the pollinators in search of pollen and nectar are bumblebees, digger bees, small carpenter bees, green sweat bees, and honeybees in addition to butterflies, and hummingbirds.

Mammals are not considered important pollinators, as deer and rabbits may occasionally nibble at them, but the plants are bitter, which discourages other mammals.

USES

Known in bygone times as woundwort, Self-heal, carpenter’s weed, or Brunella, *Prunella* has a long history of medicinal uses. It is thought that the term *Prunella* developed from the German word *die Bräune*, which is

what diphtheria was called, and what we know as *Prunella* was the plant most often used to treat the disease.²

Long before that time, the plant was mentioned in the Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing, one of three foundation books of Chinese medicine compiled in the Han dynasty in China (206 BCE – 23 CE). At that time, dried flower clusters were used for disorders of the liver and as a diuretic in Chinese medicine.³

Recent research indicates that *Prunella vulgaris* has “great potential for drug resources development” and encourages “...further strengthening research on its medicinal chemistry, mechanism of action and clinical application efficacy in the future, and striving to extract, purify and synthesize effective components with high efficiency and low toxicity, so as to improve the safety and rationality of clinical medication.”⁴

Over thousands of years, this little plant has been used to the benefit of humankind with little appreciation, and it has yet more to offer—certainly making it a natural choice as The Herb Society of America’s Notable Native™ Herb 2025.

If you still aren’t convinced, Self-heal has nutritional benefits making it useful in the kitchen.

Young leaves and shoots can be eaten raw or cooked in salads, soups and stews, or as a vegetable. Fresh or dried leaves make a pleasant tea. Some foragers suggest that harvesting before flowering reduces the possible bitterness of the plant.

Continued on following page



The Heal All

Charles G. D. Roberts, 1896

Dear blossom of the wayside kin,
Whose homely, wholesome name
Tells of a potency within
To win thee country fame!

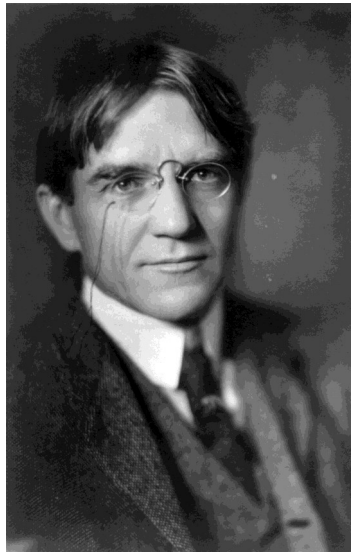
The sterile hillocks are they home,
Beside the windy path;
The sky, a pale and lonely dome,
Is all thy vision hath.

Thy unobtrusive purple face
Amid the meagre grass
Greet me with long-remembered
grace,
And cheers me as I pass.

And I, outworn by petty care,
And vexed with trivial wrong,
I heed thy brace and joyous air
Until my heart grows strong.

A lesson from the Power I crave
That moves in me and thee,
That makes thee modest, calm, and
brave—
Me restless as the sea.

Thy simple wisdom I would gain—
To heal the hurt Life brings,
With kindly cheer, and faith in pain,
And joy of common things.



Charles G. D. Roberts

1860—1943

Roberts was a revered Canadian poet, novelist, and nature writer with an affinity for the little *Prunella vulgaris* native across Canada.

REFERENCES

¹ Conrad, Jim. Jim Conrad's Naturalist Newsletter. Available online: www.backyardnature.net/n/09/090621.htm

² Maud Abbott Medical Museum. Apothecary Planters, McGill University. Montreal, Quebec, CA. Accessed online September 2024: <https://www.mcgill.ca/medicalmuseum/exhibits/mamm-apothecary-planters>

³ Zholdasbayev ME, Atazhanova GA, Musozoda S, Poleszak E. *Prunella vulgaris* L.: An Updated Overview of Botany, Chemical Composition, Extraction Methods, and Biological Activities. *Pharmaceuticals (Basel)*. 2023 Aug 4;16(8):1106. doi: 10.3390/ph16081106.

⁴ Pan J, Wang H, Chen Y. *Prunella vulgaris* L. - A Review of its Ethnopharmacology, Phytochemistry, Quality Control and Pharmacological Effects. *Front Pharmacol*. 2022 Jun 23;13:903171. doi: 10.3389/fphar.2022.903171.

Produced by the HSA Native Herb Conservation Committee with the assistance of Susan Betz, Debra Knapke, Elizabeth Kennel, Maryann Readal, Judy Semroc, and Kathy Schlosser.

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