

Fireweed Growing Guide

Notable for its tall, vibrant flowers, fireweed is a hardy perennial native to temperate regions throughout the northern hemisphere. Also called Alaskan fireweed, the plant forms dense patches that wash the landscape in brilliant color all summer long. Fireweed is a traditional edible and medicinal plant with a long history of use by native peoples. It is called *Ciilaaq* by the Iñupiaq Native Alaskans.



The name fireweed comes from its ability to rapidly repopulate an area after a forest fire, and it plays many important roles in the ecosystem. Deer, elk, moose, bear, and other wildlife eat the plants. The deep pink-to-magenta flowers provide nectar to pollinators, and the caterpillars of several moth species feed on the foliage. Fireweed honey is prized for its delicate flavor and has been called “the champagne of honey.”

Hardy and adaptable, fireweed is easily grown in youth gardens in most regions, where it can be a jumping-off point for lessons in botany, ecology, history, multicultural studies, and more. Due to its hardy growing habit, when planting fireweed in a garden setting where it may receive ideal conditions for growth, you may want to plant in a container and/or remove spent flowers before the seed disperses.

Fireweed Facts

- Native peoples traditionally collect young shoots in spring and eat them raw or cooked. As the plant matures, the older stems are peeled and eaten. Fireweed can be an important source of nutrients (including vitamins A and C, iron, copper, potassium, and calcium) after a long winter without fresh greens. Peeled roots can be roasted and eaten, though the taste can be bitter.
- Fireweed has been used as a traditional medicine to treat many ailments. A tea made from the dried leaves is used to soothe colds, headaches, infections, insomnia, and stomach problems. Topical preparations are used on the skin to cleanse and soothe burns and rashes. Research shows that extracts of the plant may have anti-tumor properties.
- Because the lowest buds on the flower spike open first and work their way up, the plant acts as a calendar to indicate the changing of the seasons. Some Alaskans consider the opening of the topmost flowers to be a sign that summer is over and winter is approaching.
- Fireweed is adapted to a wide range of habitats, and the mature height varies depending on where it's growing. In most places, the blooms reach 4' to 6' high. That said, they can reach a height of 9' in open meadows or top out at a mere 12" in the harsh conditions of alpine regions.
- Fireweed spreads rapidly by underground runners. During a forest fire, the temperature at the soil surface can exceed 1800° F, destroying all above-ground life. However, because soil doesn't conduct heat very well, the temperature several inches below the soil surface remains cooler, allowing fireweed's sturdy underground runners to survive and grow.
- Fireweed was one of the first plants to populate the area around Mount St. Helens after the volcano erupted in 1980. Scientists found tiny shoots emerging from the ash and debris just a few weeks after the eruption. Plants that repopulate areas like these are called pioneer species.

KidsGardening is a nonprofit educational organization. Support provided by sponsors and donors is critical to our ability to provide free garden-based resources for parents and educators. All gifts are tax-deductible.

- The botanical name for fireweed is *Chamerion angustifolium*. The plant was formerly in the genus *Epilobium*, but plant geneticists recently reclassified it and placed it in the genus *Chamerion*; some references still use the old name. To add to the confusion, you may also see it referred to as *Chamaenerion angustifolium*.
- Another common name is Alaskan fireweed. In some parts of Canada, it is called Great Willowherb, and it's the floral emblem of the Yukon Province.

How to Grow

Keep in mind fireweed's vigorous habit when deciding whether it's a good plant for your youth garden. In particular, note that the plant's hardy underground runners, which allow the plant to quickly repopulate areas, will just as quickly spread throughout your garden. In addition, a single plant can produce tens of thousands of seeds!

Choosing varieties

The species form is the most commonly available type of fireweed. 'Album' is a cultivated variety that has white flowers.

Selecting a site

Unless you're specifically looking to repopulate an area, it may be best to grow fireweed in containers. Fireweed is highly adaptable but grows best in rich, moist soil and full sun.

Sowing seeds

Fireweed can be grown from seeds or from purchased plants. It can also be grown from pieces of the underground runners. Sow seeds in warm, moist soil and expect germination in about 10 days.

Care

Water plants as needed to keep the soil moist but not saturated. If growing in containers, a twice-monthly application of an organic fertilizer should provide plenty of nutrients.

Harvest

Cut young shoots when they are about 2" to 4" high; you can eat them raw, steamed, or sauteed. Young, fresh leaves can be eaten raw or cooked. Flower buds can be eaten raw.

Tips

- Fireweed grows quickly, so if you're growing it in containers, it may be easiest to start a new crop each spring rather than trying to overwinter the plants.
- If planting fireweed in an in-ground bed, surround it with edging that is inserted into the soil to a depth of at least 6" to keep the plant contained.

Enjoying Your Harvest

Traditionally, young fireweed shoots are harvested in spring and enjoyed raw in salads. They are sweetest when very small; after that, they can be somewhat bitter. Kids may enjoy them more sauteed in butter and mixed with other greens or spring vegetables like asparagus.

As the plant ages, the shoots and leaves become tougher and more bitter. Once the plant sends up flower stalks, the flower buds can be tossed raw into salads to add a burst of color and flavor. The flowers can also be used to make jelly, tea, vinegars, and in baked goods.

KidsGardening is a nonprofit educational organization. Support provided by sponsors and donors is critical to our ability to provide free garden-based resources for parents and educators. All gifts are tax-deductible.