

Q: There is a big-leafed weed growing in my lawn. My husband wants to spray it out, but a friend has told him that it is plantain, a salad herb. Is this edible or a weed?

A: A weed is simply a plant growing somewhere you don't want it to be; but the plant called plantain (*Plantago major*) is one of the hitchhikers that has followed people of European descent all over the planet. Depending on who you talk with, it is either a persistent lawn pest plant, or a valued edible perennial.

The plant you have is called broadleaf plantain, and is a perennial plant that grows best in well-watered areas like lawns; in full sun or part-shade and in compacted soil. If you have pulled up a few of these plants, you may have noticed the thickened, fibrous roots that emerge from the enlarged base. The leaves emerge in a rosette pattern, with smooth, oval blades that can be as long as 7" and as wide as 4" and long parallel veins running down the leaves to the stem, which may be up to 5" in length. If the plant is in flower, which they seem to be all summer long, you may notice 2-6 spikes held above the foliage, rising 6" to 18" from the center of the rosette. The spikes have densely packed greenish white, hermaphroditic blossoms pollinated by the wind, maturing into seedpods containing 10 to 20 seeds. At maturity, from July to October, the seedpods shed their seeds onto the ground.