

Why Your Fruit Trees Want a Comfrey Companion (published 2026-09-12)

By Gus Vizgirda

If you walk through a productive orchard in East Tennessee, you might notice clusters of large, fuzzy leaves growing directly under the drip line of the apple or pear trees. This isn't a weed that the grower forgot to pull. It is comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*), a plant that many permaculture enthusiasts consider a primary tool for fruit production. Instead of relying solely on bagged fertilizers, gardeners use this plant to cycle nutrients directly into the soil where trees need them most.

The Science of the Deep Root

The reason comfrey works so well as a companion plant comes down to its root system. Most garden plants compete for nutrients in the top few inches of soil, often leading to a struggle for resources between the grass and the tree. Comfrey, however, sends a thick taproot several feet into the ground. In organic gardening circles, this is called a "dynamic accumulator." The plant reaches deep into the subsoil to pull up minerals like potassium, calcium, and magnesium that other plants cannot reach.

These minerals are stored in the large, fast-growing comfrey leaves. When the leaves die back or are cut by the gardener, they decompose and release those nutrients back into the topsoil. This effectively mines the earth to feed the fruit tree growing next to it. Because the comfrey roots are so deep, the plant is also remarkably drought-tolerant. Even during a dry August, the comfrey under a tree stays green and productive, building biomass while other ground covers go dormant.

How to Use Comfrey in Your Orchard

There are three main ways to use comfrey once it is established. The simplest method is called "chop and drop." You wait for the plant to grow large, usually right before it starts to flower, then use shears to cut the leaves and lay them flat on the ground around the base of your fruit trees. As the leaves rot, they act as a mulch high in potassium, which is the exact nutrient trees need to develop fruit.

Some gardeners prefer to make "comfrey tea." This involves stuffing the leaves into a bucket of water and letting them sit for several weeks. The result is a concentrated liquid fertilizer that is packed with nutrients. But, be advised, it has a strong, distinctive odor that is rather unpleasant. You can dilute the "tea" and pour it over the root zones of heavy-feeding plants like tomatoes or young fruit trees. Finally, because comfrey is rich in nitrogen and potassium, adding the leaves to a compost pile helps speed up the decomposition of drier materials like straw or wood chips.

Planting and Maintenance

Choose your location carefully. Because of that deep taproot, comfrey is nearly impossible to move once it takes hold. Any small piece of root left in the ground will grow into a new plant. The Bocking 14 variety is recommended, because it won't spread by seed. Other varieties can take over the rest of your garden.

When you first plant comfrey, give it plenty of space. Each plant can grow three feet wide. It prefers a spot with plenty of sun, though it handles the partial shade found under the canopy of a

large fruit tree. In the first year, avoid harvesting the leaves so the plant can focus its energy on sending that taproot deep into the earth. By the second year, you can usually harvest the leaves three or four times per season.

By integrating this plant into your orchard, you are creating a self-sustaining loop. You are using the natural biology of the soil to keep your trees productive, reducing the need for outside inputs and building a healthier garden.

Resources:

“Field Crops Manual – Comfrey,” <https://hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/afcm/comfrey.html>

“New Findings Further the Study of Dynamic Accumulators,”
<https://smallfarms.cornell.edu/2022/04/new-findings-further-the-study-of-dynamic-accumulators/>

How do I ask a question?

If you have questions for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.