the why and the wherefore: comfrey

I like to surround myself with gardening people who know what they're talking about because I am an average gardener and don't know much. Everyone, it seems, has a view on comfrey. "It's such a good feeder but it feeds us as well," says my neighbour Julia the herbalist who has a benign view of all plants and has been known to grow dandelions in pots... Peter the scientist says, "Comfrey is very very useful because of its long roots, which reach straight down.

They go looking for phosphate.” Adding: “They can reach down as far as six feet.” Andrew the vegetable man is unrivalled in his dedication to comfrey. He makes enough liquid to feed his vegetable plot plus the weekly feeding of his tomatoes. He dismisses complaints of malodorousness in the making of the feed. “It's a good smell when you know what it's going to do for your plants.”
You can almost smell it: the mucilagenous sludge before it becomes a tasty liquid feed.
Comfrey, or knitbone, has famous if controversial qualities for re-setting bone fractures and knitting torn flesh back together. It should only be used by experts. Also -- the type which herbalists like is the self-scattering borage relation and should not be introduced to your garden, warns Peter. The attractive strain shown at the top, with the winning name of Bocking 14, is "99.999% infertile" so a clump will remain a clump.
Andrew's statuesque comfrey grows in a permanent colony by his exemplary compost heaps.

Anybody with a plot can make comfrey feed easily, with the aid of a bucket, heavy object (for flattening the leaves), a lid and a plastic bottle. I was lucky enough to find some of Andrew’s Bocking 14 on my doorstep one day and I like the way it looks and certainly have never got around to making a feed out of it. I cut it down now and then and feed it to the compost heap but it feels a bit like throwing the precious leaves in the bin.

"Comfrey has beautiful flowers which bees love," says my friend Peter: this is part of my problem. "But chop it down before it flowers, otherwise the energy goes down."

For the one-step vegetable gardener, the process of cutting comfrey leaves in late spring and carrying them a few feet to the growing area could not be easier. The timing of the first cutting coincides with the planting out of runner beans and it provides a perfect mulch for them.

Even better, says Andrew: "Combine it with grass clippings so that the heat and nitrogen will help the mulch to rot down more quickly."

Thanks for reading!