

Basswood to the Rescue!

Struggling with TP hoarding disorder? Talking it out is the best therapy. Native plants can come to the rescue as well. The “Newbie Prepper” website recommends five plants with leaves suitable for this purpose, of which only mullein can be foraged locally. While very useful and widespread, and not usually troublesome, mullein is an introduced plant. I suspect that the author may not have tried the advice on the website. I confess to having had to, once, years ago. Mullein leaves are too soft, with long, flexible hairs – messy.



A nice, clean, 5x7-inch basswood leaf

My leafy bottom scraper suggestion (also untested) is basswood, whose native range includes all of eastern North America from Quebec to Florida and west to the Smokies. It has large leaves with different kinds of small hairs on the underside depending on the species or variety – and like different kinds of Charmin, stronger or softer. Also the hairs are isotropic, which means that they may work better “with” the hair direction, or “against” it, or on some other angle.

As you can see, I'm looking forward to getting closer to my local native ecosystem and healing my relationship with Earth, in the spirit of Thomas Berry. You will need to plan for a sufficient “traditional” TP supply until late Spring or Summer when the leaves are fully out. Forage sustainably, using only a fraction of the leaves. You never know when you're going to need a

healthy basswood tree nearby.

There's an ornamental basswood species from Europe called small-leaved linden or lime. The smaller leaves seem unsuitable for the present purpose being discussed. This tree does not self-propagate in the central Piedmont, so it will not be found deep in the woods, rather along streets and lanes.

Basswood is a great tree to learn for many other reasons as well. Look it up on iNaturalist (desktop web browser version) to find a tree near you. Last year I discovered one just off the path down to the lake I've used almost daily for 23 years. I happened to notice the flowers last Spring. It flowers in early May or so, varying by latitude and altitude. Basswood is "uncommon throughout its range." The "bass" in basswood refers to the inner bark's use as a source of fiber for cordage, also known as bast.

Although I hesitate to mention this in the same article, basswood leaves are the best tasting Eastern native tree leaves. Raw, the small hairs of full-sized leaves scratch the throat, and are better blanched. Sam Thayer in *The Forager's Harvest* says the young leaves, picked when half their full size, are best raw and are not irritating. Thayer also cooks the unopened flower buds. Basswood leaves may be the only TP that can work from the inside!

Mulberry leaves, when not in their mitten shapes, are sometimes confused with basswood leaves. They are also edible when young, as local foraging guru Kim Calhoun reminds me. Mulberries are more common than basswoods. However, native red mulberry leaves have an upper surface "rough like sandpaper", so make sure to use the hairy underside, and of course choose a non-mitten-shaped leaf!

Basswood produces tiny nuts in Fall. While not a practical human food, the nuts sustain tiny woodland friends such as chipmunks and flying squirrels. In Summer, hole-ridden and bitten-off leaves attest to the feeding of insects and larger animals. This seldom-noticed tree has superpowers.

I'm heading out to check on my basswood tree. I don't need it yet; however, it's a blessing and comfort to have it nearby.

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