

Apocynum androsaemifolium

[Synonyms : *Apocynum ambigens*, *Apocynum androsaemifolium* var. *glabrum*, *Apocynum androsaemifolium* var. *griseum*, *Apocynum androsaemifolium* var. *incanum*, *Apocynum androsaemifolium* var. *intermedium*, *Apocynum androsaemifolium* var. *pumilum*, *Apocynum androsaemifolium* var. *tomentellum*, *Apocynum androsaemifolium* var. *woodsonii*, *Apocynum androsaemillifolium*, *Apocynum pumilum*, *Apocynum pumilum* var. *rhomboideum*, *Apocynum scopulorum*]

BITTER ROOT is a perennial. Native to northern North America (particularly Atlantic and Pacific coastal states) it has small fragrant, deeper pink striped inside, pink flowers.

It is also known as American flytrap, American ipecac, Angel's turnip, Bitter dogbane, Black Indian hemp, Buck brush, Catchfly, Chickasaw, Colic-root, Common dogbane, Dogbane, Dogbank, Dogsbane, *Flugkål* (Swedish), Flytrap, Flytrap dogbane, Honeybloom, Indian hemp, Milk ipecac, Milkweed, Mountain hemp, Rheumatism root, Rheumatism weed, Rosy dogbane, Spreading dogbane, Tutsan-leaved dogbane, Wallflower, Wandering milkweed, Western wallflower, Wild cotton, Wild ipecac, and Wild weed; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of deceit, falsehood, figment, 'I doubt you', and snare.

The flowers secrete a sweet liquid attractive to flies, and they are also pollinated by bees.

Warning – bitter root is poisonous and should only be used under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. It can cause nausea, purging, lowered heart rate, vomiting, appetite loss and death. The milky juice can cause blistering on the skin. Livestock have been killed by eating the leaves.

The appearance of bitter root can be confused with that of Canadian hemp (*Apocynum cannabinum*). The distinction between the two (the latter does not have the obvious groups of thick-walled cells in the outer root bark) would seem to lie primarily in the hands of professionals.

Androsaemifolium is made up of the genus name *Androsaemum* and Latin *-folia* (leaved) components meaning 'with leaves like those of that genus', a genus that has been re-named *Hypericum* and contains perforate St. John's-wort (*Hypericum perforatum*).

Many North American Indian tribes were well familiar with bitter root. The Menominee not only used it as a lure in hunting (when they sucked a piece of the stalk and mimicked a hungry fawn trying to find its mother) but also peeled the outer layer from ripened fruit to obtain the fibre. This fibre was made into material which has been described as so fine that it could rival any of that made from cotton (*Gossypium* genus). Three plaited strands made very strong cord – and with further plaiting sturdy ropes were also produced. But they were by no means alone in appreciating the qualities of bitter roots' fibre. The root, bark and stems offered fibre suitable for thread, twine, cord or strong rope which were used by the Great Basin Indian tribe, the Potawatomi, Okanagan-Colville, Bella Coola, Montana Indian tribe, Meskwaki, Chippewa and Thompson Indians for binding and tying and anything from sewing thread to bow strings and fishing nets.

On the one hand the Chippewa Indians used the root during ceremonial rituals, and on the other they chewed it to counter any effects of a witch doctor's evil charms.

The Okanagan-Colville tribe could be said to be a little more down to earth as they chewed the leaves as an aphrodisiac. But the Sanpoil Indians who lived in Washington State in the

Pacific north-west prescribed a weekly root infusion as a contraceptive. For both the Cherokee and Iroquois Indians however bitter root was a source of veterinary remedies. The former used it on dogs to ease mange, and the latter gave it to their horses for worms.

It has also been valued by several North American Indian tribes including the Salish tribe for various medicinal purposes. Some of the Cree and Chippewa tribes (and also the Iroquois and Meskwaki Indians) used bitter root for various problems experienced during and after childbirth. The Chippewa tribe turned to the root for treating headaches, colds, some nervous disorders and various ear and eye problems, as did the Potawatomi for some heart ailments. Records also indicate that the Meskwaki and Potawatomi tribes used the root to treat some kidney disorders, the Iroquois relied on the plant for stomach cramps, liver problems and worms, and the Montana Indian tribe chose it to alleviate fever.

Medicinally, this poisonous plant has been used in the past by North American herbalists for the treatment of rheumatism and syphilis.