

*Aristolochia serpentaria*

[Synonyms : *Aristolochia convolvulacea*, *Aristolochia hastata*, *Aristolochia nashii*, *Aristolochia officinalis*, *Aristolochia serpentaria* var. *barbonii*, *Aristolochia serpentaria* var. *hastata*, *Aristolochia serpentaria* var. *nashii*, *Endodeca serpentaria* var. *hastata*]

**VIRGINIA SNAKEROOT** is a perennial. Native to eastern, central and southern North America, it has unpleasant smelling, dull purple to brown flowers.

It is also known as American snakeroot, Birthwort, Black snakeroot, Common snakeroot, Pelican flower, Red river snakeroot, Sangree, Sangree root, Sangrel, Sangrel snakeroot, Serpentaria, Serpentry, Serpentry radix, Serpentry rhizome, Serpentry root, Snagrel, Snake-master, Snakeroot, Snakeweed, Texas snakeroot, Thick birthwort, Virginia serpentaria, Virginia serpentry, and Virginia snakewort.

Warning – large doses of the root may act as an irritant causing abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, dizziness, diarrhoea and vertigo. Respiratory paralysis could also occur followed by coma and death.

*Serpentaria* is derived from Latin *serpentis* (snake) meaning ‘of snakes’ with probable reference to its use in healing snake bites.

The North American Choctaw Indians used the root to ease stomach pains and the Mohican, Cherokee and Rappahannock tribes all employed it as a remedy for snake bites. (It was also believed that the plant was sufficiently obnoxious for rattlesnakes that they would avoid it at all costs.) The latter two and the Natchez Indians also used the plant for treating fever. Both the Penobscot and Micmac tribes prescribed the plant as a remedy for easing convulsions, and the Nanticoke Indians turned to it for treating some worms. The Delaware Indian tribes used the plant medicinally but it would seem from records that its widest use could probably be seen at the hands of the Cherokee who, in addition to the foregoing, also used it in remedies for coughs and colds, lung disorders generally, fluid retention, stomach ailments, headaches, rheumatism and even toothache.

Originally Virginia snakeroot was thought to give protection from poisoning. Thomas Johnson, a London apothecary and botanist, described specimens brought to the capital in 1632 and it eventually came to be used medicinally in Europe. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century it is said to have been extolled for its virtues as a remedy for rattlesnake and rabid dog bites but by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century it was only being used in the treatment of fevers (usually in conjunction with cinchona bark, *Cinchona officinalis*). Virginia snakeroot was also used in the early stages of infectious diseases and small doses of it were prescribed to encourage appetite.