

Celastrus scandens

STAFF VINE is a deciduous, twining, trailing or climbing shrub. Native to North America (from Quebec to New Mexico, particularly in the North American Appalachians) it has very small, greenish or yellowish-white flowers.

It is also known as American bittersweet, *Amerikanischer Baumwürger* (German), *Amerikankelasköynnös* (Finnish), *Amerikansk trüddödare* (Swedish), Bittersweet, Bittersweet vine, Climbing bittersweet, Climbing orange-root, Climbing staff tree, False bittersweet, Fever twig, Fever twitch, Jacob's ladder, *Jesenec popínavý* (Czech), Roxbury waxwork, Shrubby bittersweet, Staff tree, Waxwork, Yellowroot, and *Zuzecha-ta-wote* (Dakota North American Indian).

A member of the spindle (*Euonymus*) family, staff vine can be found twining happily over trees, trellises and walls.

Warning – staff vine is potentially poisonous for humans and animals. Roots, leaves, or fruit can cause vomiting, diarrhoea and convulsions.

Scandens is derived from Latin *scandere* (climbing) meaning 'climbing or twining'.

Among the North American Indian tribes to whom staff vine is familiar (and for many, possibly poisonous) the Menominee have a particularly earthy story which explained how the plant came to be bequeathed to them as an emergency or famine food and conveniently provided a reason for antipathy towards a neighbouring tribe, the Winnebago. Its scrambling, twisting stems could be reminiscent of intestines supposedly, according to some records those of the Menominee's cultural hero, and it is the stems' inner bark which can give palatable sustenance – which provided emergency rations for the Chippewa and Potawatomi tribes as well.

North American Indian tribes applied various identified medicinal qualities they found in staff vine. Records note that it could be used by the Delaware, Cherokee and Meskwaki tribes for various problems that could occur during or after childbirth, and the Iroquois used it for treating some period disorders. It was a Cherokee remedy for coughs, and the Delaware Indians prescribed it in treatments for tuberculosis. The Cherokee and some of the Chippewa tribes treated various stomach upsets with it, and the former also used it for various bowel disorders. It was chosen sometimes by some of the Muskokee Indians for treating urinary disorders, and both the Chippewa and Delaware Indians used it for fluid retention. The latter also prescribed it as a remedy for sores, and the Chippewa valued it as part of treatment for skin cancer. It was believed by the Cherokee to be able to ease rheumatic symptoms, and the Iroquois also used it for anaemia and toothache. Despite the foregoing however authorities also note that the Iroquois believed that the berries are poisonous, and the Oglala tribe felt this way about the whole plant.

Rarely used medicinally in folk medicine, authorities tell us however that the plant was once employed to treat skin cancer, leucorrhoea, liver disorders and rheumatism, and was prescribed to encourage periods.