

Polygala senega

[Synonyms : *Plantula marilandica*, *Polygala senega* var. *latifolia*, *Polygala virginiana*, *Senega officinalis*]

SENEGA is a perennial. Native to North America it has small pinkish-white or greenish flowers.

It is also known as Milkwort, Mountain flax, Rattlesnake root, Rattlesnake snakeroot, Seneca root, Seneca snakeroot, Senega root, *Senegarot* (Swedish), Senega snakeroot, Seneka, Snake root, Tennent's root, Virginian milkwort, and Virginian snakeroot.

Warning – senega is poisonous. In large doses it can cause vomiting, diarrhoea, vertigo, disturbed vision, sneezing, thirst, nausea and other symptoms.

Senega comes from the name of a North American Indian tribe, the Seneca who (like the Cherokee) used the plant for treating snake bites – a remedy that has since been disputed.

Records show that several North American Indian tribes included the plant in their medicinal repertoire. Apart from snake bites, Cherokee Indians used it to treat pleurisy, croup, fluid retention and rheumatism, and also used it for period problems and as a laxative and an agent to cause sweating. It was a Blackfoot remedy for some lung problems and the Chippewa Indians valued it for treating convulsions and bleeding wounds. For the latter it was also a stimulant and tonic. Meskwaki and Chippewa Indians both used it for treating some heart ailments, some of the Cree tribe used it for various blood disorders, and some of the Chippewa turned to it as a cough remedy. For some Cree Indians and also some of the Chippewa the plant could be used to treat various oral problems – and some of the Cree also used it to ease toothache. It seems to have been most popular as a cold cure among the Micmac, Malecite, Cherokee and some of the Chippewa tribes.

Senega root was to receive especial attention from a controversial Scottish physician, John Tennent (died 1748), who was in Pennsylvania in about 1735 and learnt about the Seneca Indian tribe's use of this root for curing rattlesnake bites. The symptoms experienced from these bites seemed to him to be similar to those for pleurisy (certainly rife at that time in Virginia if not elsewhere) and for pneumonia. He decided to experiment with the root on these illnesses and then published his findings in 1736. Records suggest that he gave the root such publicity that it was over-harvested in the East of the Continent – to such an extent that around 1887 collectors were having difficulties finding it there.

Medicinally, herbalists recommended the root for treating some respiratory disorders, fluid retention and rheumatism, and today this continues particularly for asthma, bronchitis, catarrh and croup. In homoeopathy senega is used to treat double vision and other eye disorders.