

*Veratrum viride*

[Synonyms : *Helonias viridis*, *Veratrum album*, *Veratrum eschscholtzianum*, *Veratrum eschscholtzianum*, *Veratrum eschscholtzii*, *Veratrum eschscholtzii* var. *incriminatum*, *Veratrum lobelianum eschscholtzianum*, *Veratrum viride* var. *eschscholtzii*]

**AMERICAN WHITE HELLEBORE** is a perennial. Native to north-eastern North America it has small greenish-yellow flowers.

It is also known as American green hellebore, American hellebore, American veratrum, Bearcorn, Bigbane, Big hellebore, Branch eliber, Bugbane, Bugwort, Common swamp hellebore, Corn lily, Crow poison, Devil's bite, Duck retter, Earth gall, Elever, False hellebore, Giant false-helleborine, Green false hellebore, Green hellebore, Green veratrum, Indian hellebore, Indian poke, Indian uncas, Itchweed, Lyngwort, Meadow poke, Pepper root, Poke, Poke root, Poor Annie, Puppet root, Rattlesnake root, Rattlesnake weed, Skunk cabbage, Swamp hellebore, Tickleweed, True veratrum, Vernal varebell, White hellebore, and Wild hellebore.

Warning – very poisonous and must not be taken internally (especially the roots and leaves). It can cause nausea, vomiting, irregular pulse, shallow or stertorous breathing, perspiration, prostration, muscular tremors, occasionally convulsions, lowered body temperature, semi-consciousness, loss of sight and death. Contact with the leaves can cause dermatitis. It can be poisonous for animals and birds.

*Viride* is Latin (green) with reference to the flowers.

North American Indian tribes were well aware of the plant's poisonous qualities. Not only were American white hellebore, black hellebore (*Veratrum nigrum*) and European white hellebore (*Veratrum album*) all used as arrow poisons but American white hellebore was used by some North American Indian tribes as an ordeal poison. It is said that in these tribes the Chief was chosen by his ability to survive the administered plant. Records also show that the roots were used for both abortion and suicide certainly in the Kwakiutl and Blackfoot tribes respectively.

Surprisingly authorities have noted that the Blackfoot Indian tribe made a soup from the leaves. Gitksan Indians used the roots as soap for washing clothes, and the Shuswap and Kwakiutl tribes used the plant for hairdressing (for the former it provided a remedy for baldness, and the latter valued it for treating dandruff).

American white hellebore roots played a role in the ceremonial ritual of several Indian tribes including the Oweekeno, Haisla, Gitksan, Salish and Hanaksiala. They also featured in Kwakiutl rain rituals – and Kwakiutl hunters completed purification rites before they set out by rubbing their bodies with the leaves. The roots also provided a good luck charm for the Haisla, Bella Coola and Gitksan tribes, while Hanaksiala Indians included a plant decoction as an ingredient in a charm that would draw good fortune to them. With the possible exception of the Gitksan, the three tribes and the Kitasoo and Kwakiutl Indians all respected protective powers in the plant or root as well – powers that would offer a shield from witchcraft.

Despite the fact that it seems to have been common knowledge among Indian tribes that the root (or even the whole plant) could be dangerous American white hellebore was used medicinally by many North American tribes – no doubt with great care. Kwakiutl, Bella

Coola and Haisla Indians all employed it as a laxative, it provided an agent which could promote sweating for the Salish tribe, for the Haisla Indians it offered a sedative, and the Bella Coola, some of the Carrier and the Kwakiutl tribes all used it to cause vomiting. For the Hanaksiala, Thompson and some of the Okanagan-Colville Indians it offered a treatment for blood problems, Blackfoot and Iroquois used it for headaches, and it was used to treat colds by the Iroquois, Kwakiutl, Haisla, Salish and Okanagan-Colville too. It acted as a cough remedy for the Bella Coola, Hanaksiala Indians used it for various lung disorders, and the Iroquois turned to it for a treatment for tuberculosis. While Bella Coola Indians prescribed it for stomach upsets, heart ailments and venereal diseases, Blackfoot Indians used it for easing indigestion. Oral problems were treated with it by the Flathead, Thompson, Blackfoot, Kutenai and Tsimshian Indians, and it seems to have been a fairly popular remedy for rheumatism as well as records show that it was used in various ways for this by the Haisla, Salish, Cherokee, Oweekeno, Okanagan-Colville, Tsimshian, Bella Coola, Hanaksiala, Quinault, Kitasoo and Thompson tribes. Iroquois, Kwakiutl and Bella Coola Indians all applied it to various skin disorders, Kwakiutl, Cherokee and Cowlitz Indians all used it externally to ease pain and the Cherokee tribe also valued it as an external stimulant.

Dried and powdered plant has provided an insecticide.

It was first recognized as a formal medicinal remedy in the United States at the time of the War of Independence in the 1770s when the supplies of the related European plant (*Veratrum album*) were cut off – as these had been imported from England (from whom the United States was trying to free herself). One of its uses then had been for removing lice which had been achieved by combing a strong decoction through the hair.

Today the plant is only used in veterinary medicine.

Herbalists used to recommend it for the treatment of high blood pressure, arteriosclerosis, pneumonia, peritonitis and other fevers.