

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #82 answer: HEMP DOGBANE (*Apocynum cannabinum*)

Cannabinum is an ancient word for hemp, with cognates in many language families. Though dogbanes recently moved from the hemp family to their own Apocynaceae, they still share hemp's fibrous nature and carry its name.

Apocynum simply means that dogs (*canis*, as in *canine*) should keep away (*apo*). So should most other mammals, because cardiac glycosides, especially cymarin, abound in the milky sap that fills the reddish stems and the veins of leaves. Once used as a stimulant, this chemical can stop a mammal's heart.

For insects, the toxicity is a boon. Butterflies and bees feast on nectar in the flowers' tiny five-pointed bells. The leaves host larvae of the delicate cynthia (a tiger moth), the clearwing hummingbird moth (a miniature hummingbird look-alike), and the snowberry moth, making them taste bitter to predators. The dogbane leaf beetle, fearlessly flashing green and gold, feeds on the leaves, storing toxins in special glands. If predators approach, the beetle sprays them.

Many websites call hemp dogbane a pest. It does dig in stubbornly. The woody orange rootstocks sink 6 feet down, creep 10 feet, and multiply if fragmented by shovel or plow. This perennial can make 60 seedpods; and the long pods, dangling like slender green beans, are tightly packed. One plant can send 12,000 seeds aloft on the wind.

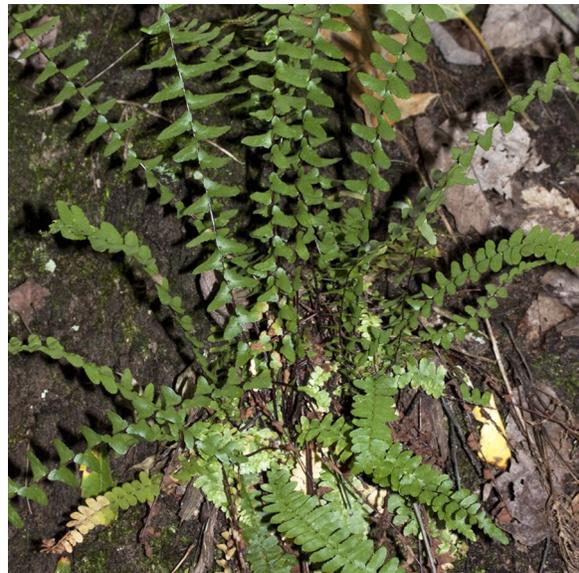
Yet first peoples in the Americas have a different perspective. Knowing that hemp dogbane loves disturbance, they used to set fires to open habitat, encouraging new, straight long stalks. For millennia they used the floss attached to seeds and the bast fibers from phloem, the conductive tissue in the stems. Twisted, these fibers become strong, silky cordage for nets, ropes, snares, mats, and garments.

WILDFLOWER #83

Clues: Sprightly narrow fronds stand erect above ground-hugging fronds.



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