

36. *APOCYNUM ANDROSAEMIFOLIUM* L. (APOCYNACEAE) — Bitterroot, Spreading Dogbane



Bark once used as a hemp substitute, for bags, fishing lines, linens, string, and twine. Flowers frequently imprison insects. The floss can be used as a cotton substitute or stuffing. Sugar, perhaps dangerous, can be obtained from the flowers. Plant has been suggested as an emergency rubber source. Dried latex makes a very flammable gum elastic.⁴⁶

Used as an alternative in rheumatism, scrofula, and syphilis. Digitalis-like, apocynum slows the pulse and has strong action on the vaso-motor system. Powerful hydragogue, helpful in dropsy due to heart-failure. Has been called the “vegetable trocar in ascites of hepatic cirrhosis”.² With his propensity to recommend relatively poisonous herbs, Kloss⁴⁴ describes bitterroot as good for arthritis, fever, malaria, mucositis, neuralgia, rheumatism, and typhoid, excellent for the bowels, digestion, kidneys, and liver, especially valuable in gallstones and “wonderful for diabetes”. Frankly I fear the herb, considered cardiotoxic, cathartic, diaphoretic, diuretic, emetic, expectorant, laxative, narcotic, poison, purgative, sudorific, and tonic. Some Indians believed that eating the boiled root would result in temporary sterility.⁴⁵ Fumes from burning dried roots over coals inhaled for headache. Boiled green fruits used for heart and kidney ailments. In his AmerIndian draft, Duke⁴³ notes that Cherokee used it to treat mange in their dogs. Chippewa and Ojibwa used the roots for headache, the Chippewa snuffing it, inhaling the fumes, or even applying the root to incisions in the temple. They also used the root for convulsions, dizziness, insanity, nervousness,