
Wildflower Spot – May 2015
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

DOGBANE

Apocynum cannabinum

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

This shrub-like herbaceous perennial grows 3-5 feet tall with attractive purplish stems that branch near the top. The long, drooping leaves are opposite on the stem, attached with short stalks. Like milkweeds, which they superficially resemble, both stems and leaves produce a milky sap when broken. White, bell-like flowers appear in clusters at the ends of branches from May through July.

This plant is found in all counties of Virginia, and throughout the U.S. and Canada.

Easy to grow, with erect stems, Dogbane would fit at the back of a perennial border or at the edge of woodlands. It prefers full sun and somewhat moist soils but tolerates both flooding and drought. The Monarch butterfly uses Dogbane for nectar and as host plant for its caterpillars.

The common name, Dogbane, refers to the plant's toxic nature, which has been described as "poisonous to dogs." *Apocynum* means "away dog!" and *cannabinum* means "like hemp." The roots were commonly harvested in the 19th and early 20th centuries for a variety of folk and other medical purposes. Native Americans and colonists used the berries and root in weak teas for heart ailments and as a diuretic, with appropriate preparation, since all parts of the plant



are poisonous, containing glycosides affecting heart activity.

Also known as "Indian Hemp," Native American women made miles and miles of twine from the long fibers in the stems of this plant. Their homes were constructed of vertical and horizontal poles covered with bent saplings, all lashed together with Dogbane twine, which also furnished fishnets, baskets, mats and ropes. Such uses are thousands of years old – Dogbane remnants have been found in ancient archeological sites. ❖

Photo: Dogbane (*Apocynum cannabinum*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.