Indian Hemp
*Apocynum cannabinum*

Family: the Dogbane family, Apocynaceae.
Also called Wild hemp, Amy-root, rheumatism root, and wild cotton.

Indian Hemp, *Apocynum cannabinum*, is a common perennial meadow flower that forms colonies of stems connected by rhizomes. The herbaceous stems can reach 2 meters (6 feet) in height. These leafy stems die back to the ground every fall to be replaced in the spring by numerous shoots originating from the over-wintering rhizomes. The species in this genus are too toxic to be safely pursued as food, but have been used as a staple utility fiber in indigenous communities for many centuries.

Indian hemp is a member of the type genus, *Apocynum*, in the dogbane family, the Apocynaceae. This family, first erected by Jussieu in 1789, then included the milkweed family, the Asclepiadaceae that was subsequently removed and given its own family status. New studies combining cladistics and molecular markers seem to imply that the milkweed family, should again be repositioned within the dogbane family.

The name Indian hemp reflects the long heritage of this species as being important to the acquisition of rope/fiber resources. The fibrous cylinder of the erect stems can be fashioned into twine, thread, fishing line, netting, and blanket weaving. The stems can be used dead or alive for a variety of uses, but dead stems are best used before they have spent an entire freeze/thaw cycle outdoors. When fiber is extracted from the year’s stalks, the resulting yarn is soft and quite strong. When the plant is alive it can yield thin threads for fishing lines.

Dogbane is named for its reputed effect of repelling (or killing) dogs. The translation of *Apocynum* is literally *away-with-the-dog*. Today there is little use of our species to poison dogs. While the genus of milkweeds, *Asclepias*, has species with well-documented food uses for humans, the dogbanes in *Apocynum* do not. While the

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Dogbane pods are long and slender and usually open in the early spring following maturity (below left). Milkweeds (below right) have broader pods that usually open in the fall, soon after maturing.

Dogbane plants in North America [occasionally including milkweeds also] are the hosts for one of our most brilliant beetle species, the Dogbane leaf beetle, *Chrysochus auratus*. This centimeter-long iridescent leaf beetle, often prominent on the foliage, evades threats by playing dead and rolling off the leaf surface to the ground below.

Foliage of both dogbanes and milkweeds eventually stockpile enough cardiac glycosides to be dangerous to the normally functioning human heart, dogbane acquires these levels very quickly, whereas some milkweeds, especially common milkweed, *Asclepias syriaca* can be consumed as a double-boiled herb early in the season’s development, long before high levels are produced.