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Black cohosh

Black cohosh (*Actaea racemosa*) has its roots deeply embedded in American Indian history. Cohosh is an Indian word meaning rough. Black cohosh roots have been a traditional source of medicinal support for women over 50 years of age. Black cohosh is also called bugbane, snake root, bugwort, fairy candles, rattleweed, rattleroot, and squaw root.



Medicinal properties

The historical uses of black cohosh include relief for colds, cough, constipation, pain relief, sleep aid, rheumatism, general pain relief and stimulating menstruation. The American Indians used the bruised roots as an antidote for snake bites.

It is the key ingredient of the Change-O-Life[®] formula. While studies indicate that black cohosh shows no estrogenic effects of the uterine wall cells, they have demonstrated that at least 3 of the constituents participate in helping with the relief of hot flashes by lowering LH levels.

It can help tone the muscles of the reproductive tract, and ease pains and contractions of child bearing. The analgesic and antispasmodic properties make it an excellent candidate for PMS relief.

Extracts (ethanolic, isopropanolic, and others) of black cohosh rootstock are active ingredients developed for the treatment of gynecologic disorders, particularly climacteric symptoms.

Black cohosh constricts the blood vessels, making it an excellent remedy and preventative for headaches caused by dilation of the blood vessels- the cause of some migraines.



Natural habitat

Black cohosh can be found in shaded woodlands of the United States and Canada, particularly in the southeast, northern Oregon, Washington, and Ontario. The plant is hardy in zones 3-9. (Please refer to the 1998 US National Arboretum "Web

Version" of the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map for detail). They are tall with feathery racemes of white blossoms measuring 1 to 3 feet long, hence the name "fairy candles". The flowers bloom in June and July and thrive in moist, shady areas. The stout, black rhizome along with the root are used for medicinal effects.



Cultivation

In his article, Burrell (1999) mentions that Bugbanes can be easily grown in gardens. They can be propagated through seeds. To quote, "As woodland wildlings, they prosper in a humus-rich soil that retains moisture throughout the growing season. They are best suited in partially shaded spot, with some direct light."

In his book, Miller (1998) mentions that black cohosh is a hardy perennial that propagates by division and can be cultivated in 'rich, forest floor' soil in partial shade.



Harvest, storage, and processing

Miller (1998) mentions that black cohosh roots should be sun-cured with a temperature variation of 100 °F to 140 °F. This method of drying results in split roots. He also mentions that the dried bark is to be packaged in burlap sacks and stored in unheated warehouse.

The roots of black cohosh are either powdered or extracted. Alcohol or vegetable

glycerin is used in the extraction process. The roots are ground (cryogenically, if dry) and immediately subjected to cold process kinetic maceration or percolation.



Marketing

The wildcrafters sell the roots locally or to small dealers who, in turn, sell it to manufacturers and major botanical wholesalers.

Black cohosh root, together with roots of *Dioscorea composita* and *Angelica sinensis*, is marketed as phytoestrogen. They are used as dietary supplement for supplying dietary support needed to naturally assist normal healthy life changes in women.

Black cohosh root, together with Damiana (*Turnera aphrodisiaca*) leaf and stem, Siberian Ginseng root, and Ginkgo Biloba leaf, is marketed as menopausal solution.

Black cohosh root, together with Shatavari (*Asparagus racemosus*) roots and other herbs, is marketed as Cycle I Estrotonic to be taken during days 1 to 14 of the menstrual cycle.

Black cohosh is marketed in the form of powder, capsules, and extract by Solaray, Emerita, FemSupport, Nature's Way, Herbs etc, and many other companies. Some typical brands are Nature's Resource Black Cohosh, Remifemin, Schiff Menopause Nutritional system, Solaray's Phytoestrogen,

and Emerita's Phytoestrogen body cream and Libido formula.



Conservation and management concerns

Like other medicinal herbs, black cohosh is also facing habitat degradation. With the increased utilization of black cohosh for medicinal purposes, it is disappearing from its natural habitat. To decrease the pressure on from the natural habitat, black cohosh can be cultivated. Burrell (1999) mentions that clumps of bugbane mature quickly and can be divided after only a few years.



References and information resources

(You may be able to find some of these or other publications in your local library. Another valuable resource is your local cooperative extension office.)

Burrell, C. C. 1999 The Soaring Cimicifugas. Horticulture. July/August: 48-51.

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Central North America. Houghton Mifflin Company. New York.

Grieve, M. 1971. A Modern Herbal. Dover Publications. New York. (Vol. I & II) 902 p.

Hutchens, Alma R. 1991. Indian Herballology of North America. Shambhala Publications, Inc., Boston. 382 p.

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McFarlin, B. L., Gibson, M. H., O'Rear, J., and Harman, P. 1999. A national survey of herbal preparation use by nurse-midwives for labor stimulation - Review of the literature and recommendations for practice. Journal of Nurse-Midwifery. 44(3): 205-216.

Miller, R. A. 1998. The potential of Herbs as a Cash Crop. Acres USA, Metairie, LA.

Pepping, J. 1999. Black cohosh: Cimicifuga racemosa. American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy. 56(14): 1400-1402.

Tyler, V. E. 1997. The Honest Herbalist. Prevention, April: 76-78.



Electronic resources

Phytochemical Database, USDA - ARS -
NGRL, Beltsville Agricultural Research
Center, Beltsville, Maryland

<http://www.ars-grin.gov/duke/ethnobot.html>

Black Cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa* Nutt)

by Andrew Pengelly

<http://metalab.unc.edu/herbmed/neat-stuff/cohosh.html>

Natural Products Monograph of the
Association of Natural Medicine
Pharmacists

<http://www.anmp.org/monographs/bcohosh12.html>

Body Wise

<http://www.bodywise.org/ingredients/blackcohosh.html>

Complementary and Alternative Medicine

<http://www.geocities.com/chadrx/blackco.html>

Natural Product Monographs: Association of
Natural Health Pharmacists

<http://www.anmp.org/monographs/>

The United States National Arboretum:
USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map

<http://www.ars-grin.gov/ars/Beltsville/na/hardzone/ushzmap.html>

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