

## Indian Hemp

I became more intensely interested in Indian Hemp after hearing Bill Layman talk about how strong it is during a presentation on the fishery at Kettle Falls. The J-traps that hung in the falls to catch salmon could hold 250 fish, many weighing 50 pounds each. That's 6 tons of fish. Add several strong men to throw the fish to shore for another half ton, all suspended by Indian Hemp ropes. What is this stuff?

You can be thrown off immediately by the term Indian Hemp. Just as natives of North America are not from India even though called "Indians", Indian Hemp is not "hemp".



From Emily S. Kloosterman,  
Wikimedia Commons

"Hemp" is a German word referring to the plant known in Greek as "kannabis". Switching from Greek to Latin is not much help. The Latin name for the plant is *Apocynum cannabinum*, which perpetuates the cannabis confusion. If we get back to the *Arocynum* part, it breaks down to "Poisonous to dogs", "Keep away from dogs" or more commonly "dogbane". This is referring to the fact that indian hemp is related to milkweed. They both have a sticky sap that protects them from most insects and is slightly poisonous to humans though it can be used as medicine. Although the sap is toxic to browsing animals,

the nectar is sweet and important for the monarch butterfly and some other insects. The plant is also known as amy root, hemp dogbane, prairie dogbane, Indian hemp, rheumatism root, or wild cotton. I will stick to dogbane.

There are two main types, *apocynum cannabinum* and *apocynum androsaemifolium*. The *cannabinum* is typically 3 feet tall and is the preferred variety for making cordage. *Androsaemifolium* is also know as "spreading dogbane" and is usually 2 feet tall. Both prefer sandy but also wet soil with some shade. Both grow all over North America in abundance. (It's nice to have something native and useful that is not endangered.) Dogbane is a perennial. It grows from the same roots year after year. In fact, harvesting it every year makes it grow better, very sustainable and low tech. It would have been readily available on seasonally-flooded wetlands along the Columbia River.



The stalks of this plant have been used as a source of fiber to make bows, fire-bows, nets, tie down straps, hunting nets, fishing lines, bags, and clothing. (Travels into North America: Kalm, Pehr (1772) The Sinixt were known for making rope suspension bridges over creeks along their trails. The bridges stretching out to favorite fishing rocks at the Kettle Falls fishery were also made of Indian hemp. It was also used to make cloth and bags. That seems too tedious to us in the technological 21<sup>st</sup> Century. I remember watching a circle of Indian women in Mexico shucking corn together and talking away. Tedious to us can be fun to others.



Dry stalk (top), crushed stalk (middle), bracelet and left-over pith.

So how do you get to the fiber part? It's easy and doesn't require tools. The time to harvest is in the Fall, though the dried stalks make it through the winter and seem to work fine right now. In the Fall it turns yellow, making it easy to spot. Over the winter it turns reddish and then fades to brown or gray. Break off the dried stalk with your hands and remove the small branches at the top. Then squeeze the stalk. It breaks into several strands with the dried pith in the middle and the fibrous skin starting to peel away on the outside. To separate the

fiber, break off pieces of pith working your way along the strand. If you try to peel off the whole skin at once, some sticks to the pith and you get less. Now you have a workable length of fiber that is very flexible and strong. The seeds can be ground into an edible powder and the sap can be mixed with clay to make gum.

The fiber can be twisted into cordage and be built up into rope. There are plenty of videos on the Internet that will make the method more understandable than I can in writing. I am hoping to show kids how to use it to make small bracelets as a craft project during the 2025 bicentennial commemoration of the establishment of Hudson's Bay Fort Colville in 1825. To test the process, I hung a small peg in the center of the strand and twisted the ends together on the other side of the peg. After a few minutes I had a cord with a loop at one end. I tied off the ends so they would not unravel but if you were making cords and eventually rope, you would keep adding pieces of fiber to the twisted ends. Eventually I added a few beads and made the bracelet in the picture. Before I did that, however I wanted to see just how strong this stuff is. You could work up a scale to measure weight hanging from it and add more until the cord broke to get a real measurement of test strength. I just tied it to a ten-pound kettle bell exercise weight. The thin cord made from just one of four strands from the original stalk held it up easily. No wonder they thought of it as hemp!