

Wild Ginger

(*Hexastylis arifolia*)

Birthwort Family – Aristolochiaceae

Growing close to the ground with leaves that are evergreen, wild ginger is easy to spot during the winter months in mature, hardwood forests. The heart-shaped leaves are pale, whitish-green with dark green veins and margins. At the base of the plant, the flower bud is forming that will open early in the spring into a small, maroon to brown cup-shaped flower with three petals, coming together at the base. The flowers are often described as resembling little brown jugs, another common name. To see the flowers, lift the leaves carefully from around the plant. Because the flowers are on the ground, they rely on ants or beetles to pollinate them.

The plants spread underground by horizontal stems just beneath the surface, and are fairly easy to dig. Use kitchen scissors to snip off small sections of the root and then replant. This way it continues to spread and you haven't hurt the plant.

Uses

Leaves and roots have an aromatic smell similar to sassafras due to the safrole contained in them. An extract from the leaves and roots has been used as a flavoring. The roots can be made into a syrup. Traditionally, root and leaf infusions were used to treat heart and lung conditions (Plant Database, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center).

Wild ginger is in the Birthwort family (Aristolochiaceae) and has been associated with childbirth by mountain women who used the root during pregnancy to ease the aches and pains (Martin, 1984). It has also been used medicinally to treat coughs, asthma and other ailments and by women during childbirth to ease the aches and pains. The Menominee and Chippewa would eat the roots or boil them to make a tea to help digestion (Moerman, 1981). The tea was also used to treat coughs, colds, sore throats, promote sweating and as an expectorant (Foster and Duke, 2000). The Catawbas used *Hexastylis arifolia* for heart pains (Vogel, 1970). The Canadian Indians drank an infusion of *Asarum canadense* for heart palpitations (Weiner, 1972). Edgar Cayce recommended ginger for intestinal disorders, poor digestion and lymph circulation, often in a formula with other herbs, including wild ginseng (*The Cayce Herbal*, Meridian Institute).



Wild Ginger Syrup

3 oz. (90g) wild ginger roots, chopped

1/4 c. sugar

3/4 cup water

Combine sugar and water. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat, add chopped ginger roots and reduce heat. Simmer 20-30 minutes.