

Endangered Herb White Cohosh (*Actaea alba* or *A. pachypoda*) by Abbie White 3/15/15

White cohosh is also known as Baneberry, Snakeberry, Coralberry, and Doll's Eye. From the image, you can easily see the reason for the common names. The simplest way to identify various blue, black, red, and white cohosh species is by the color of the fruit. Information from 1892 in *American Medicinal Plants: An Illustrated and Descriptive Guide to Plants Indigenous to and Naturalized in the United States which are Used in Medicine* by Charles Millspaugh is relevant today:

History and Habitat.—The white cohosh is a common herb in our rocky woods, especially southward and westward. It flowers in May and ripens its pretty china-like fruit in October. This species, together with *Actaea rubra* (red cohosh), has received the attention of many writers upon medical botany. The two species vary principally in the color of the berries and thickness of the pedicles; probably slightly only in their properties and action. They are, however, widely different from *Actaea racemosa*, our *Cimicifuga*, and should under no circumstances be confounded with that drug. Just how much our species of *Actaea* differ from the European *Actaea spicata*, Linn., still remains to be proven. This much we know, that the American species are much milder in their properties.



<http://www.sipseywilderness.org/trips/2006/SpenceField/report.html>

This perennial inhabits the same areas as Black Cohosh. Both cohosh species are considered endangered in many states. White Cohosh has contraindications and I so do not recommend use of this herb. The medicinal history is interesting and includes an in depth review 1885 titled "Drugs and Medicines of North America: A Publication Devoted to the Historical and Scientific Discussion of the Botany, Pharmacy, Chemistry, and Therapeutics of the Medicinal Plants of North America. Vol. 1: Ranunculaceae." This book is worth a home in your e-book collection. Page 243 provides an excellent summary.

is cathartic. The United States Dispensatory omitted *Actæa* in its first edition (1833), but mentioned it in the second edition (1834), although nothing of importance has since been added. Prof. King considered White and Red Cohosh together in the first edition of the American Dispensatory, and he accepted the possibility of its being cathartic, for he wrote: "Said to be purgative and emmenagogue."

Frederick Stearns,* 1858, intensified its cathartic properties, as follows: "The rhizome possesses violent purgative power." This is, no doubt, overdrawn, but that both *Actæa* and its near relative *Cimicifuga* have cathartic properties, in large doses, is supported by the investigation of Dr. Erick Sattler.†

The facts are: *Actæa alba* and *Actæa spicata* var. *rubra*, together with *Cimicifuga racemosa*, were used by the American Indians as emmenagogues and parturients, as well as in the cure of rheumatism. Thus they became known to the whites, and by reason of their introduction were employed in domestic practice in the same manner. They accordingly were brought before the medical profession, and while the abundance of *Cimicifuga racemosa* enabled it to become a common remedy, the relative scarcity of the *Actæas* kept them from being as well known. There is really little difference, physically, chemically, therapeutically, or physiologically in the the three plants; they are gathered indiscriminately, and doubtless the common plant, *Cimicifuga*, will naturally always take the precedence. Neither species of *Actæa* has ever been officinal.

The beautiful white berries have inspired many cute and decorative common names such as Necklace Plant and Coral-and-Pearl. However, the berries are poisonous and can act as an immediate sedative on human cardiac muscles. A high dose can lead to cardiac arrest and death. Birds eat the berries with no ill effects and are the primary dispersers of seeds for new plants.

With my research over the past few months, I have come to understand the importance of distinguishing between different cohosh species that include blue, black, white, and red and believe this clear identification needs to be a public service message to the herbal community. I recommend only the careful herbal use of black cohosh from sustainable sources. While staying in Raleigh, NC, recently, I visited an herbal shop known as Herbables. I noticed a gallon jar labeled as blue cohosh and inquired if black cohosh was available, too. The friendly owner replied that the two herbs could be used interchangeably. Sadly, I did not want to engage in a scholarly argument to disagree with her. The importance of white cohosh in the wild is that it is an indicator species for the presence of other cohosh plants. Should you find white cohosh on your land, you may want to consider planting black cohosh plants near by.