

Calamus Root

Calamus (aka Sweet Flag and Singers Root) is a vigorous reed-like aquatic plant growing in ditches, swamp-like areas along and around small streams, rivers and lakes. Digging this plant is a real joy or chore depending on how you see it. Matthias puts on his waders when he goes to dig this plant. Its tentacles or rootlets have a deep connection to the Earth Mother, restricting its extraction. It is like a centipede with its many legs holding on to the Earth. Pulling Calamus out of the Earth is like the sound and feel of wringing out a wet mop or sponge. Once acquired, it is put in a plastic bushel crate (in our area these are used to harvest grapes and have small holes throughout) and is placed in the small stream that runs through this meadow to soak and dislodge some of the soil (mud) that is attached to it.

Once when Matthias was digging, he kept hearing a cow mooing and mooing. He and the farmer that owns the land went up the hillside and found a young heifer that somehow had gotten upside down in a brushy tree. This is why our neighbors like us to wildcraft on their land. It is always good to have many eyes and ears to know what is happening.

Calamus has a spicy fragrance to it with the leaves having lemony overtones. In medieval times, the dried stalks were laid on floors to act as a scented mat to walk on. It's a forager's treat, as you can eat the raw, partially grown flower stems of Calamus. In Spring, the young stalks with half-grown leaves packed inside them are sweet and tasty raw in a salad. The roots are edible with a sort of gingery, spicy, bitter, sweetness to them. Foragers also use Calamus as a spice to replace cinnamon, ginger or nutmeg, but a little goes a long way. Candied sweet flag root has the aromatic spiciness of ginger, and like ginger, helps to settle the stomach (see recipe below). In the United States, people would use Calamus as an ingredient in making wine bitters.

Many different indigenous people use this root for its medicinal properties as well as its various other uses. It is held in high esteem as a cure for numerous afflictions. The root has been found in the Pyramids of Egypt, and the Bible talks of priests using Calamus Root as an anointing oil during the Exodus.

Native American groups utilize this plant in many ways. Some tribes gathered the green blades and braided them into "garlands" which they would wear upon their necks due to their pleasant odor. These garlands were also used in many ceremonies, both mystic and medicinal. In fact, the aromatic qualities of this plant often ascribed mystic powers to it.

The Menominee gather Calamus Root from creek beds or river banks; they dig up the plant, wash it, tie it up, and hang it to dry. This is the "proper way to keep it," according to Leonard Bloomfield. They use it to treat colds and throat infections. The afflicted person must put the Sweet Flag into their mouth, chew it, and swallow the saliva that accumulates. They believe this soothes the throat and cures any associated symptoms such as coughing. Because the plant is very bitter, many people believe it has medicinal properties and that it works. Another way to treat throat conditions or tuberculosis is by boiling the root in water and making a tea from it. The Menominee also considered the root to be a cure for stomach cramps. The rhizomes of this plant are particularly aromatic, since they contain certain aromatic oils, and have therefore been used medicinally as a physic. It was popular to use this plant as a cure for colds through smoke treatment.

Other cultures have been known to use Calamus Root to treat a variety of afflictions. Some have used it to cure colic and other digestive diseases, or to aid other medicines such as cinchona or quinine. The root is pounded up and then infused with drinks or other medicines to be consumed by whomever is ill. Others have used the plant externally by applying it to the skin to "keep up" discharges and pus from blisters or sores. The root has been used as a remedy for toothaches and fevers as well. Another use is as a powerful tonic effect on the stomach, encouraging its secretory activity. It helps to stimulate appetite, useful in anorexia. Chewing on a little piece is a great breath freshener. The powdered root can be used as a natural insecticide. Put a little on window sills to keep ants out.

Calamus rhizome is also thought to increase stamina. The rhizome was used in much the same way as coca (*Erythroxylum coca*, Erythroxylaceae) leaves in the Andes as a stimulant, to allay hunger, and to boost stamina. The plant seems to have been cultivated along travel routes in North America, perhaps to aid in these applications.

The calamus (*A. americanus*) variety found in the Americas has been chewed (dried rhizomes) in sweat lodges and pow-wows to help numb vocal cords alleviating the hoarseness often experienced in long ceremonies. A small piece of the rhizome can be chewed or even just held in the mouth allowing saliva to increase. Chewing the rhizome also allows for increased range and centering the singer's energy. Calamus rhizome is also thought to increase stamina.

While Calamus can also stimulate attention, it is also considered a relaxant. In this harmonizing effect, it increases "the expression of the vital force, while [relaxing] resistance to that expression." Culpepper stated that it "strengthens the stomach and head" and it was used for conditions related to nervousness and anxiety.

Overall, the effects of Calamus are attributed with calming you, but not in a sleepy way. It is classified as atomic bitter. It makes you more alert, centered, and even stimulated; in fact, the effects of Calamus have been compared to that of the traditional Coca leaf. It calms by increasing a sense of well-being. This is perfect for tapping into the subconscious and Dreamtime. It helps you slow down enough to be open to insights and remember your dreams, as well as stimulating them and lending more lucidity to those who seek it.

Ayurvedic medicine has used it for thousands of years as a brain and nervous system rejuvenative. It is said to sharpen memory, enhance awareness, and aid in cerebral circulation, as well as clear toxins and obstructions from the subtle channels. Ayurvedic practitioners consider Calamus to facilitate vacha (speaking) and prescribe it to promote self-expression. Calamus rhizome is also said to promote sexual energy and increase kundalini. Therapeutic actions include expectorant, decongestant, stimulant, and antispasmodic. Calamus has been used in cases of asthma, neuralgia, shock, epilepsy, coma, deafness, and loss of memory. A paste can be applied externally to arthritic joints and to the forehead for headaches to relieve pain. According to Frawley and Lad, Calamus is considered one of the best herbs for nasal applications for nasal congestion and for increasing prana.

We encourage you to learn more about this plant, experiment with both the reed-like leaves and the roots. Be conservative in its harvest, plant it in your garden if you have a marshy or wet area and honor the Healing Spirits of the plant.

To make Calamus candy, slice the tender bases at the bottom of the stems into very thin slices. Parboil them, changing the water a few times if you want to reduce the fierceness of the taste. Then simmer them, just covered in syrup (2 parts of sugar to 1 part of water) until most of the syrup is absorbed. Drain and then dry them on waxed paper. When dry, roll them in sugar and store them in a sealed jar.