

Non-Timber Forest Product (NTFP) Black Cohosh



Wild black cohosh – (photo credit: adobe)

Other common names: Squaw Root, Papoose Root, and Rattle Snake Root — Latin Name: *Actaea racemosa*

Family: Ranunculaceae (buttercup family)



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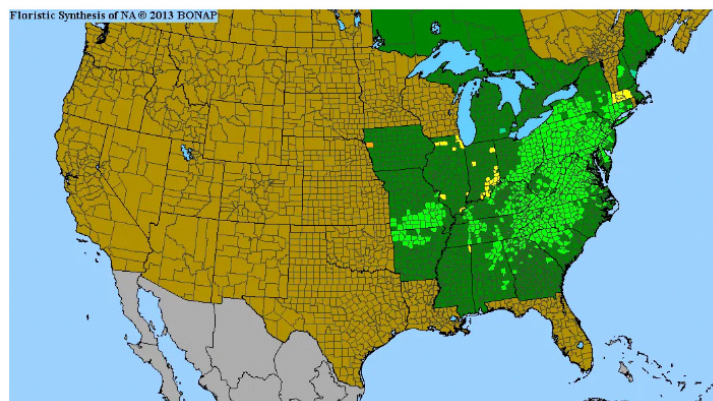
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Range:

Black cohosh is found throughout the eastern US. Their native range is concentrated in and around the Appalachian Mountains and the Ozarks.

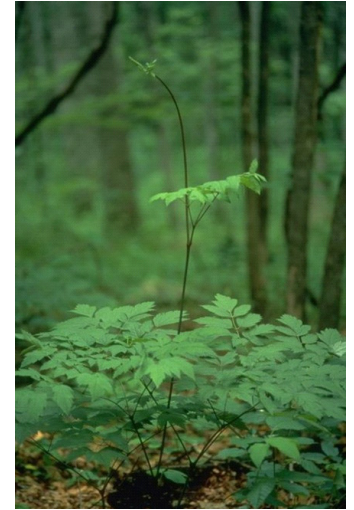


- | | |
|---|---|
|  Present in state |  Present and rare, native in county |
|  Present in county and native |  Previously present, now locally extinct |
|  Present in county, but introduced |  State or county listed as noxious |
|  Not present in state |  Present in state, exotic |

Native plants can be grown outside of their native range in the appropriate growing conditions. This map shows the native range, as well as the introduced range, of this species.

Description:

Black Cohosh is a perennial species found along forest edges and deep-shaded interiors. Plants grow three to eight feet tall as single or multiple stems with a spreading three-foot canopy of leaves. It produces distinguishable seed pods that rattle when dry. Black cohosh rhizomes are dark brown to black and have long been prized as a valuable medicinal herb.



Black Cohosh foliage - photo by Steven Foster

Propagation:

Like most woodland herbs, black cohosh can be propagated by either rhizome cuttings or from seed. For root propagation, cut the rhizome into one-half-inch pieces with at least one bud and several fibrous rootlets per cut segment. Exclude the old growth at the end of the root. Plant cuttings two inches deep and spaced 18-24 inches apart. Roots can be planted in either the fall or early spring while they are still dormant. Cover roots with one to two inches of topsoil and one to two inches of leaf litter. Plants started from roots can be harvested after four to six years.

Black cohosh can also be grown from seed. Seeds can be started in nursery beds for wood-cultivated plantings or sown directly in wild-simulated sites. Plant seeds approximately one and a half inch deep and space one and a half to two inches apart. Cover seeds with one inch of hardwood leaf litter. Seeds that are planted immediately after being collected should germinate at a relatively high rate. Some seeds may not germinate until the following spring (16 months).



Black Cohosh flower - photo by Steven Foster

Pests:

Black cohosh is susceptible to several fungal pathogens, including leaf spots, root rots, and damping-off disease. Diseases are more prevalent in areas with inadequate airflow and poorly draining soils, leading to too much moisture. Therefore, careful site selection and preparation are important. Deer will browse the leaves, which reduces root growth. Slugs, insects, and rodents can also cause problems.

Harvest:

Harvest of black cohosh is typically done four to six years after planting. Using a spade fork or other digging tool, carefully dig up mature plants. Harvest rhizomes in the fall when the root mass and medicinal potency are at their peak levels.

Conservation status:

Black cohosh is considered endangered throughout much of its range. Whole-plant harvesting of this slow-growing plant, combined with habitat destruction from development and logging, puts this species at risk. Wild populations are overharvested to support the growing herbal products trade.

Market potential:

Black cohosh is a primary component of commercially available post-menopausal formulations. From the years 2000 to 2010, it is estimated that 2.7 million pounds of root were traded on the global market. With only five percent of this demand being met by cultivated sources, there is a significant need to increase forest-grown supply.

References:

Filyaw, T.R., editor. 2019. *The Forest Farmers Handbook: A Beginners Guide to Growing and Marketing At-Risk Forest Herbs*. Rural Action.

Lonner, J. April 2007. Medicinal Plant Fact Sheet: *Cimicifuga racemosa*/Black Cohosh. A collaboration of the IUCN Medicinal Plant Specialist Group, PCA-Medicinal Plant Working Group, and North American Pollinator Protection Campaign. Arlington, Virginia: PCA-Medicinal Plant Working Group

United Plant Savers. Black Cohosh – *Actaea racemosa* [Internet]; [cited on 2022 Oct 18]. Available from: <https://unitedplantsavers.org/>