

**PLANT PROFILE: Dogbane - *Coleus canina* or *Plectranthus caninus* (P. caninus)** Also known as Scat, Scaredy cat, Scaredy plant, Cat repellent plant, Dogs be gone coleus, Coleus canina, Piss-off plant, Coleus spicatus

Dogbane has been marketed as a Coleus for many years, but its closest relative is *Plectranthus amboinicus*, or Mother of All Herbs (Five Spice Herb), another incredibly useful medicinal herb for your garden. The name 'dogbane' is used for several plants in the Apocynum genus, so don't confuse it with these. These plants are mostly found in the northern hemisphere and look very different to the semi-succulent *Plectranthus*. Sometimes known as Indian hemp, the Apocynum genus are poisonous and have been implicated in animal (dog) toxicity, which is how the name came about. Be careful to identify your plant carefully!



Like Mother of All Herbs, Dogbane is suited to many uses in the garden including:

- Drought hardy ground cover.
- 'Chop and drop' mulch with long-lasting fragrant leaves and stems.
- May help deter pest insects, dogs and cats. Remember it's toxic!
- Compost ingredient.
- Weed suppressant (particularly good to out compete nut grass in my experience).
- Beneficial insect magnet in late winter/early spring when purple flowers appear en masse and last for months. Flowers attract bees to improve pollination and can be used as cut flowers.
- Underplanting fruit trees and food forest gardens as a companion plant. It helps shade roots without competing for nutrients as it is a succulent and has very shallow roots.
- As an attractive, fast-growing low hedge, border or space filler and feature plant.
- As a temporary low-maintenance ground cover over summer to prevent weeds growing in unused garden beds. (Keeps microbes alive without robbing soil of nutrients – a kind of 'care taker' plant).
- Attractive flowering ornamental in pots, rockeries and hanging baskets. Stunning flower spikes form in winter (July onwards).

**Toxicity:** All parts are poisonous if ingested. Handling plant may cause skin irritation or allergic reaction. Pollen may cause allergic reaction.

### Growing Conditions

This non-edible herb prefers full sun to part shade, but may need more shade in very hot areas. If there is too much shade the plant will take on a 'leggy' appearance, with the stems attempting to stretch up to find sun, while the foliage lags behind. If it becomes leggy, just chop it back with a hard haircut and use it as mulch.



Ideally, a warm but protected position is best to ensure that wind, frost and extreme heat are kept to a minimum. Dogbane is not very well suited to open conditions where cold and frost will be present. Moist soil is recommended, which will help the plant maintain moisture levels in the thick leaves. However, once established it is extremely drought hardy. It is easy to grow and best left alone. It will self-control weeds.

## Growth Habit

Dogbane is a perennial herb from the mint family, which grows on average to 15 cm high or 30 cm when the flowers stalks appear. However, in good soil with lots of organic matter and moisture, dogbane can sit up to 30-45 cm high as it does in many places in my subtropical garden. The flowers rise above this height. The plant takes on the appearance of a semi-succulent, with its light green leaves holding moisture and standing firm. The leaves are narrow and obovate, (they are broader above the middle). They may be approximately 3-4 cm long by 2-4 cm wide. The branches are semi-erect and the plant is covered in small hairs. The stunning blue-purple flowers take on a succulent and tubular appearance, before the petals open on the tall inflorescence.

The flowers are highly attractive to honeybees and other beneficial insects seeking nectar and pollen. The plant flowers in winter- summer where it puts on a wonderful show in the garden as a feature plant.

Dogbane is a spreading shrub, very much like mint on steroids. It forms a pleasantly shaped domed shrub if allowed to take its own shape and is very well behaved. It grows in pots or a rockery, where it integrates well with succulents. In a pot or hanging basket, the branches will hang slightly over the edge, while the leaves remain generally upright. Like most varieties of the *Plectranthus* genus, dogbane is grown mostly for its ornamental value. A single plant can easily occupy a 1m area. Pinch out growing tips to create a bushier, more compact habit.

## Plant Uses

While not that unpleasant to human noses, it can deter cats, dogs and bandicoots from the immediate area when it is brushed or trodden on. This does mean that certain areas of the garden can stay 'out of bounds' to four-legged gardeners.

Dogs and cats are reputed to be able to smell the aroma on intact leaves and be repelled from the plant. However, there is no scientific evidence to suggest that these claims are true so experiment in your garden! Try chopping and dropping the leaves as mulch on vulnerable plants and see if this makes a difference.

Pest insects also seem to be repelled by the strong scent and I've never seen any insect attack it, including grasshoppers.

Dogbane may be used as an insect repellent by crushing the leaves and rubbing the essential oil on the skin.

It has long been used in Traditional Chinese Medicine. When crushed, the leaves are strongly aromatic, although not unpleasant to humans.

I find Dogbane is a fantastic companion plant for fruit trees and vegetables. It's been incredible for weed prevention in my rock wall crevices and weedy zones by outcompeting them. It completely covers the rocks with no weed seeds able to take root. I use it to 'take areas out of play' that are too difficult to manage due to slope or access. I regularly use it as a low-growing hedge and haircut it so it's a neat shape. I can't think of anything bad to say about this plant. If you can tolerate the strong scent, it's a worthy addition to any garden.

## Propagation

To propagate dogbane, simply drop a stem on the ground or poke it into potting mix and it will root! Dogbane is easy to grow from cuttings in a glass of water, in a well-lit room. You can also separate even the tiniest plantlets along the stem and root these in potting mix. Dogbane tolerates a wide variety of soil conditions and makes a great gift for any gardener. I hope you enjoy growing it and sharing it with friends and family.

