Proper Use of Acorus Calamus

by Bittersweet

Dose: T+ 0:00  oral  Calamus

Body weight:  0 lbs

Reading through the ‘experience reports’ of people experimenting with Calamus root prompted me to offer this information. It is not meant to help anyone ‘trip out’ or ‘see entities’, but rather to (hopefully) prevent the ignorant from causing themselves to much physical distress from reckless experimentation based on heresy and rumor. I am an experienced herbalist and have been using Sweet Flag (Calamus Root) as a sacrament and medicine for many years. It is NOT poisonous or particularly dangerous, and vomiting is not likely if it is used properly.

Most of the available herbal info on Sweet Flag is on its use as a carminative and digestive bitter. What this means is that it stimulates digestion by promoting the production of bile, stimulating peristalsis of the intestines, and getting the stomach churning and ready for food. This is what it does in proper doses. Traditionally, the root was chewed, though a suitable infusion can be made by soaking it at the TOP of a closed jar of COLD water overnight. Hot water infusions and alcoholic tinctures are dreadful, and that’s coming from someone who likes the taste (it’s acquired). A tablespoon of the dried, cut and sifted root is adequate, and the entire tea need not be consumed. Calamus will usually settle heartburn, nausea and gastritis (inflammation of the stomach) prepared this way.

When you take a LOT, all at once, you overstimulate a stomach that doesn’t need stimulation, and what you may get is vomiting. This is not an inherent toxicity in the plant, but the result of using it when it is not needed. An equivalent examle might be that it makes sense for a person to drink hot tea outside in the winter, but to do so on a balmy day in Florida would be stupid.

As an appetite stimulant it is the ideal remedy for anorexia, because of its antianxiety effect (described below). The bitter/carminative effects get the digestive system going, and that makes the person feel hungry.

As an antiemetic (eases nausea), it isn’t an all purpose remedy like Ginger, Peppermint or Catnip, but specifically treats motion sickness - car or air or whatever; anything characterized by what I call a ‘dizzy/queasy’ feeling in the stomach - this is a primary indication for its use. I’ve used it myself driving through the Appalachian Mountains from Tennessee to North Carolina, when the roads were either all up and curvy, or all down and curvy. Chewing a little bit, from a few pieces of the cut and sifted root to a tablespoon or so, promptly brought relief.

The root is also good for throat colds, sore throats, chest colds and head colds. It is antibacterial, and I’m convinced antiviral as well. Chewing the root not only fights the infection (especially for
throat colds) but is also stimulating and helps to overcome the run down feeling that you get with a cold (though, of course, that means you need to rest...). Native Americans still use it extensively for this purpose, calling it Bitterroot. A Tauramaura Indian I know, who was raised by Lakota, chews it in the Inipi (Sweat Lodge) when his voice becomes hoarse from singing. Laryngitis, caused or aggravated by speaking, yelling or singing is another specific indication for its use.

I gave it to a young man to help with his allergies (stuffy head/mucous congestion - I can’t remember how to spell ‘catyrrh’), also because he’s always run down (unfortunately an adolescent alcoholic). He says is works better than anything else he’s ever tried, and continues to do it; he even gained an appreciation for the taste. Sweet Flag is an antihistamine.

As a stimulant, Sweet Flag is used similarly to the way Coca leaves were used by the South American indians. It increases energy and stamina and allays hunger (even though it stimulates hunger in an ‘anorexic’ situation). I’ve used it when Backpacking when it’s dusk and I’ve been walking all day and my pack is heavy and I’m a mile away from where I need to be to set up camp. This is the source of the oft quoted ‘it makes you feel as if you are walking a foot above the ground’ or 'as if your feet do not touch the ground.' It has little to do with its alleged Hallucinogenic effects.

As a sedative, it does not act as a nervine, but as an antianxiety medicine. Sweet Flag is perhaps best described as ‘calming and centering’ - that’s why it can be both stimulant and sedative, it puts your energy into balance, and gets you energetically resonating as a whole. For this reason it is almost without equal as a treatment for panic and anxiety attacks. Not only for full fledged episodes, but for the ‘little daily anxiety attacks’ that most of us can relate to. It is especially good when a intense/traumatic situation occurs, and you handle it excellently, but after its over you’re all strung out and a nervous basketcase. I’ve used the plant extensively for the following patient profile: feelings of dizziness, nervous queasy stomach, ‘leaving the body’ pyschologically, panic, looks like a scared animal in the headlights, doesn’t know which way to go, frozen by fear, disassociated... all these are good indications. Have the person chew on Calamus and breathe deeply, fully and slowly and the anxiety and panic will fade.

Incidentally, its antianxiety effects are the reason why it was used for quitting smoking, not because it causes a ‘distaste for Tobacco’ (not true - indians smoked them together for headaches). Nicotine fixes are very much like the anxiety picture that Sweet Flag is good for, but if you are using it to try to quit smoking you will STILL need immense will power - there’s no magic bullet for the Tobacco habit.

There is evidence that chewing the root has cured diabetes among certain Native American tribes, but I have yet to find specific information on where the source material is for this.

(This is probably the part you’ve been looking for... if you skipped over the above, shame on you!) Sweet Flag also has a sketchy repuation as a ‘hallucinogen’. This is based on a page or two in a book called ‘The Hallucinogens’ by Hoffer an Osmund - try your local university library to find it. Virtually all that you hear quoted and misquoted comes from these two pages. As someone who uses this plant regularly (as opposed to Hoffer and Osmund, who wrote about people who told them about how they used it twice), I find the information presented misleading and overstated.
Conclusions are made by the authors that have no basis in fact. Having a person compare Calamus root to LSD doesn’t mean that Calamus’s effects are like LSD, but that the person didn’t have anything but LSD to compare its effects to. The two are not similar. In my opinion, Calamus is NOT hallucinogenic, but it IS psychoactive. The effect is very subtle, and hard to put your finger on. Most people - especially those waiting for a LSD/Mescaline/Psilocybin like experience - won’t even notice it. I’ve heard countless people say it has no effect, but I’ve been using it for years and can speak from personal experience, not to mention its revered status among EVERY culture that used it throughout history.

Though I certainly don’t advocate engaging in illegal activities, if a person was to want to explore the use of Sweet Flag, this is what I might suggest trying: Add a small amount of Sweet Flag to Cannabis and smoke it. Notice how the effect differs from Cannabis alone. Ruminate on this a while.

Next, smoke some Cannabis (alone) and chew up a teaspoon of the cut & sifted root - you needn’t swallow. Notice the similarity between this method of administration and smoking it. If you are sensitive, you will notice that the effect is ‘cleaner’. Do this a few times, till you have a feel for the presence of the plant.

Now chew a tablespoon of the root, but don’t smoke anything. Try to feel the presence of the plant, but without the Cannabis. Do this until you can distinguish the effects of the Sweet Flag without using Cannabis.

Okay, if you’re still interested, GOOD! She probably likes you. Now, chew up larger quantities of the root, remember you don’t need to swallow it, just chew it up in the corner of your mouth (between your jaws and cheek) and spit it out when thoroughly chewed (You can chew and swallow it, but but you might not have built up the stomach for this yet...). You can consume up to an ounce of root this way, but don’t try and do it in a big marathon race before a party for some ‘longed-for transcendental experience’ - Calamus rarely rewards impatience. Go for a walk out in a park, with few people to distract you from your self assessment, chewing the root as you hike. Don’t worry about chewing ‘enough’, stop when you feel done. Now stop and smoke just a puff or two of Cannabis - no more than that. Stop for a while and relax. Soak in your surroundings. Listen. If Calamus is an ally for you, you will know it by now.

Now you can begin to totally avoid using Cannabis with Calamus, and, if you continue to work with the plant in a sacred way, you can get into that space by chewing very small amount of the root, and eventually, perhaps simply by summoning the plant from within. This is what shamans refer to when they say that the spirit of the plant comes to reside within them. At this point, the spirit of the plant is always accessible when you need it.

This process, which involves slowly and diligently working with a plant and getting to know it (rather than bursting in its door saying ‘show me something profound!’; which is the way most so-called ‘psychonauts’ [what a stupid word] do it) is imperative to building a relationship with a plant that could be deemed as ‘having an Ally’. Most plants dislike that people come to them wanting something, without taking the time to give of themselves. People solely seeking a strong
‘psychedelic’ trip will never be able to experience the magic in a plant like Calamus in the same way a capitalistic land developer will never appreciate the field for the flowers - they just aren’t focused in the right place. And that’s fine, because those people aren’t ready to learn what Sweet Flag has to teach, anyways.

This was the first plant I really got to know primarily by using it, without having read or studied virtually anything about it. Most of what I learned about being able to tune into plants, I learned from it. The plant is incredibly wise, very sentient, and telepathic. I could go on for days about the stuff I’ve learned from this plant; even just sitting next to it. But all that stuff is for you to learn from Her.

One last note on toxicity: First, the plant is not toxic. The studies that led to that conclusion were based on massive doses of beta-asarone (only one chemical in the plant among thousands) given to lab rats over an extended period of time. Human use of the plant - in North America, Europe, Russia, India and Asia - is always associated with health and longevity. Perhaps the study does yield a pertinent caution if you plan on eating several pounds of the fresh roots for months at a time. Otherwise, don’t lose any sleep over it. Also, beta-asarone is not the active ingredient (both strains with and without beta-asarone may be used similarly), nor is it converted into TMA-2 in the body. Whoever first asserted that is an idiot, as it led to all sorts of erroneous misinformation. Jonathan Ott first suggested that other ‘unidentified’ compounds were likely the active ingredients back in the seventies, but I can say that the effects of the plant are due to the combined effects of all of its ingredients, and that it can’t be reduced to one or two. Most plants are this way, and only a very few have single, powerful ingredients (usually - but not always - these are alkaloids).

Some resources for further study:

Hoffer and Osmund ‘The Hallucinogens’ - see above opinion
Stephen Foster ‘Herbal Renaissance’
Douglas Elliot ‘Wild Roots’
Frawley ‘The Yoga of Herbs’
Stephen Buhner ‘Sacred and Herbal Healing Beers’
Maude Greive ‘A Modern Herbal’

On learning how to make relationships with Plants as Allies:

Stephen Buhner ‘Sacred Plant Medicine’ - essential reading