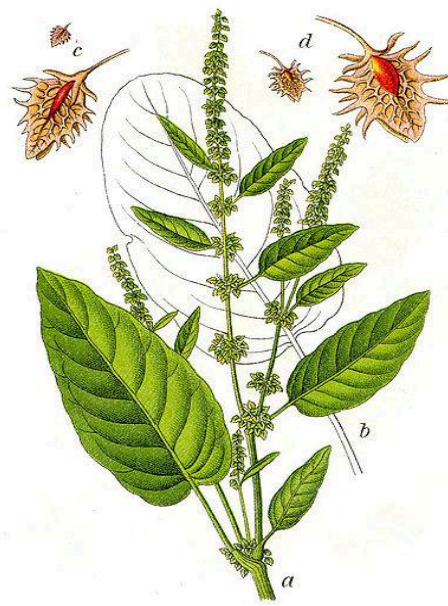


Species of the week



Broad Dock

Rumex obtusifolius

Copóg shráid

Rumex obtusifolius is an erect perennial herb that grows up to 40-150cm tall, found on arable land, meadows, waste ground, roadsides, ditches and shorelines.

Plants usually consist of a basal rosette of leaves and a large, fleshy taproot. The edges of the leaves are slightly "crisp" or wavy, the upper surface is hairless, and the under surface may be papillose. The leaves develop individually as tightly rolled leaf spikes. These spikes unfurl about a week after initiation, the leaves going on to expand to a maximum size of 40 cm long by 20 cm wide.

The stems are tough, often reddish, and unbranched until just below the inflorescence. The junctions of the petioles with the stems are covered by a sheath formed by two fused stipules known as an ocrea, a thin, paper-like membrane - a characteristic of the Polygonaceae family. The stem leaves are alternate and are narrowly ovate-lanceolate. Leaf area and stem length are very variable in response to environmental cues, especially light. Developmental rates and overall plant size also vary a great deal between individuals grown in similar conditions.

During flowering, which occurs from June to September, a tall spike up to 150 cm in height is produced which bears the inflorescence. This consists of large clusters of racemes which contain small greenish flowers that change to red as they mature. The perianth-segments are in two whorls of three. Segments in the outer whorl are small and spreading while the inner whorl forms fruit valves, which are widely ovately-triangular. The seeds are dry and reddish brown. The number of seeds produced is highly variable, from about a hundred to a maximum of 60,000 to 80,000. The seeds are small and highly dispersive. They are capable of being moved long distances by wind and animals and can be transported both on the coats of livestock and via their dung. However, the majority of the seeds tend to be found clumped

close to the parent plant. The seeds can remain viable in the soil for many years. A very small number of seeds retain viability after 80 years burial and around a third remain viable after 20 years. The underground stem system can also split naturally with age and secondary root systems develop, allowing the plant to spread asexually.

Flowering seldom takes place in the first year of growth (although it has been recorded as early as 9 weeks after germination), thereafter the plant normally flowers once a year, but twice is not uncommon. Following flowering, the plant undergoes defoliation. This can result in a complete loss of leaves for up to two months.