

Jimson weed: a fatal beauty

By Mark Wheeler / Hi-Desert Star

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MORONGO BASIN - The recent Eric Sears tragedy in Joshua Tree National Park has put "jimson weed" into the front page news. It's another in a long line of old stories. Almost every summer there's another incident: someone playing fast and loose with a dangerous chemistry she or he doesn't know anything about.

Datura wrightii is the botanical name for a plant found in abundance in the Morongo Basin and adjacent desert lands. One of two species native to the Mojave and Colorado deserts region, it is in the same family as the edible potato, tomato and pepper, along with a number of other plants notorious for their toxicity, such as henbane.



What makes *Datura* - the name from India - so poisonous is its concentration of alkaloid compounds.

These chemical additives act on the nerve endings in the human body. Effects range from agitation to lethargy, but the famous power of these compounds to dull pain and reduce muscle spasm shows that the tranquilizing affect is most typical.

Indeed, respiratory arrest - a cessation of breathing - is universally mentioned in all botanical and medical warnings about this plant.

Other symptoms of *Datura* poisoning include visual disturbances, nausea, fever, delirium and acute cardiac difficulties.

That death is a genuine risk when using it as anything but a photo subject is well demonstrated in Bean's and Saubel's book on Cahuilla plant usage. They note: "Even among the Cahuilla with their long experience with the drug, accidents have occurred and a number of deaths have resulted."

As remarked in many texts, *Datura*'s mystical reputation derives from its use, wherever in the world it grows, by indigenous peoples for non-ordinary reality and spiritual purposes. Southern California tribes, according to Bean and Saubel again, used it for marathon dancing and singing ceremonies, and for male rite-of-passage ordeals.

Medicinally, the Toloache, by its Mexican name, and thorn-apple by another North American common name, is an important source for atropine and scopolamine. The former is used as an anti-spasmodic, and the latter is found in treatments for vertigo and seasickness.

Epel wrote in his "Herbal Field Guide to Plant Families," that, "Soldiers in the Persian Gulf War carried the alkaloid atropine with them as a treatment for nerve gas attacks." The anti-spasmodic effects which made it such a boon in the Middle East serve only to illustrate how deadly this plant, and its properties, is as a central nervous system depressant here in the civilian world.

Found along roadsides right now throughout the Basin, *Datura* is a lush and beautiful attraction. Its large, white trumpet flowers, increasingly darkened by purple with age, cannot fail to elicit comments of admiration from the passerby, especially when the bush is full and plentifully supplied with blossoms.

It's a far better object of admiration, though, than it is a source of entertainment, as many have learned, sometimes fatally. "Look but don't touch," is what the plant should say to all of us. After all, it is a member of the Solanaceae family, by another name, "Nightshade." Think about it.