
The Sacred Datura

by: Margaret Stewart

THORNAPPLE, MOON LILY, JIMSONWEED, WHATEVER

This time of year summer plants are in a great hurry. As they sense the days growing shorter, the urge to bloom and produce seeds becomes intense. A little rain sparks their growth, and the beauty of new flowers amazes us.

One of the standout plants in August and September is a Sonoran Desert native with a series of unusual names. It is commonly called Sacred Datura,¹ but Thornapple and Moon Lily are even more descriptive titles. This perennial is highly selective about where it will sprout. It can most often be spotted along roadsides or washes, where



there is enough water to keep its six-inch, heart-shaped leaves from wilting. A large shrub, Datura can grow to four feet, spreading out in all directions.

Sacred Datura is a member of the nightshade or potato family.² Annie Orth Epple in her book *Plants of Arizona* warns, “All parts of plant extremely poisonous if ingested. Datura was one of the most important medicinal plants to early Native

¹ Scientific name: *Datura wrightii* (formerly *Datura meteloides*); in a good year, extensive stands of Datura can be seen along Seven Springs Road, north of Camp Creek; photos taken there.

² *Solanaceae* Family.



Americans.” She doesn’t say how this apparent contradiction can occur, but perhaps it was used as a poultice or ointment.

Given enough water, the Sacred Datura produces spectacular white flowers. Slim, pointed buds appear on the ends of the branches, changing from green to a dull



purple as they mature. The moon lilies appear to shoot, neatly packaged, out of their pouches and open into a five-sided trumpet of united petals, seven inches long and five across. They bloom late in the cool of the evening, filling the air with a delicate perfume, and droop as soon as the sun hits them in the morning. But for those few hours their deep throats are full of bees and other insects, drawn by their fragrance to act as fertilizing agents for the production of seeds.

In a few days the pouch and flower will drop away from the sepal, revealing a tiny green bump covered with soft spines. As the “thornapple” matures, it dries to a tan color and the spines harden, a protective deterrent to the soft mouths of predators.



Inside, tightly packaged, are many slippery little seeds, which plant themselves when the thornapple pops open.

Identifying the Sacred Datura is easy when it's blooming, but there is a secret way of identifying the plant when it's only a seedling. Rub a leaf

between your fingers and do a sniff test. If you smell peanut butter, you have found a Sacred Datura.



Years ago Gene Autry, in his famous theme, "I'm Back In The Saddle Again," sang this line: "Where the white-faced cattle feed on the lowly jimsonweed." Jimson is one more name for this lovely plant. After a bit of research, I realized that he should have sung "jimmyweed," the name of an opportunistic member of the sunflower family that thrives on overgrazed land, replacing native range plants. Fussy Sacred Datura could not have tolerated such a hot, dry environment.

