

Devil plants-Halloween

Festivities at the end of October include more than just Nevada Day; it is also the time to send out young people in great costumes to get candy. Halloween is a relatively tame holiday now, in comparison with its earlier roots. All Hallows Eve was once the night when specter, ghosts, witches and other unpleasant characters were on the prowl looking to torment unsuspecting people.

Some of our plants have kept that ghoulishness in their common names, which indicate how some people look at their world. Putting the word “devil” in a plant’s name will automatically cause one to treat it with a certain amount of caution.

A demonic plant can be edible, if only to some people. One excruciatingly hot pepper is known as the Dominican Devil’s Tongue (*Capsicum frutescens*). It makes sense that since the devil was reputed to come from a netherworld of fire. This relative of the habanero (scotch bonnet) pepper is listed in



Dominican’s Devils Tongue

the Guinness book of records as the hottest of all chilies.



Devil’s Cholla
native to Africa.

There are quite a few cacti that are grouped together as “cholla” and these are all very spiny characters, but one native to our area is so intimidating that it is commonly known as “Devil Cholla” (*Grusonia kunzei*). Its lovely yellow spring flowers cannot hide the fact that this is well protected by spines.

Southwestern Native Americans used the seedpods of *Proboscidea* species both for food and as a material for baskets. These pods, which ripen in summer or fall, have a long hooked beak, which leads ne “Devil’s Claw”. Other plants with that name are



Proboscidea

Not all plants will automatically inspire fear, despite their devilish names. A common houseplant of the kalanchoe group (*Kalanchoe diargremontiana*), which is also one of several known as Mother of Thousands, has the name “Devil’s Backbone”. Presumably, the multiple plants that surround the leaves looked like a backbone to someone. More importantly, it contains a toxin that can cause harm to children and pets if eaten.

Another houseplant with an unexpected name is Devil’s Ivy, or common pothos (*Epipremnum aureum*). Although it is known to remove indoor pollutants like formaldehyde, it can be toxic to dogs and cats if they eat it.

Here in the southwest, we have a beautiful wild plant, a cousin of tomato and pepper. Quite hardy, it grows as an annual in colder



Scared Datura

places, but is a perennial here. This large leaved shrub has spectacular white flowers, which yield a very spiky seed pod, if they are pollinated. This plant, *Datura wrightii*, is known as both “Sacred Datura” and “Devil’s Trunpet”. It is hallucinogenic (which might be the source of both common names) and should be kept away from children and pets.

So, a really devilish Halloween garden could be decorated with some searing hot peppers, a wildly spiny cactus, and a shrub with great white flowers. With the addition of very dramatic looking claws, and ivy and kalanchoe in the window, it would be attractive different from all the neighbors’!

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