

## Jimson weed

Many of our favorite food plants – tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, tomatillos, and potatoes – are all closely related, botanically speaking. This is not a huge family, but it does contain a surprising number of individuals that are important to us. Not only those vegetables; it also contains petunias, nicotiana, as well as the number one narcotic in the world, tobacco.

Another member of this group will soon be in full bloom, and it is quite impressive.

Have you had the chance to drive along some parts of town where a lot of construction has been going on? Maybe you have been in a wild looking area not far from a water source.

If you have, perhaps you noticed a plant with big, deep green leaves and gorgeous white bell shaped flowers. You might have thought it belonged more in a garden than in such rough terrain. In fact, it looks like the absolute opposite of a desert plant.

We frequently talk about the survival mechanisms of desert natives – small thick leaves (if there are any leaves at all), generally small flowers, and if annuals, the plants themselves have a tendency to be small. Then you come upon this large plant with big leaves and big flowers, and you wonder.



*Jimson Weed Bloom*

This is a very showy member of the tomato, potato, pepper, petunia, family. Its scientific name is *Datura stramonium*. Some sources say it is an eastern US native, while others say the desert southwest. It appears to grow in almost any environment, including some hostile ones, as long as it has access to water. One might think just casting a few seeds would establish it in a desert garden. It has spread almost everywhere in the world, including all the American deserts. A publication from New Mexico State University claims that it is easy to cultivate from seed, but a friend who is quite the horticulturist has tried many



*Jimson Weed*

times and never succeeded. Perhaps that is not a bad thing. It looks so cultivated, one would probably never think it made both cowboys and cattle crazy, yet it can. *Datura* is “Devil’s weed” but its more common name is “Jimson weed”. It appears to grow best in calcium rich soils, which we have here in the *in abundance*.

I thought Jimson weed was something you only heard about in old movie westerns. No, it is real, both a true garden plant and a weed.

I did not think much about it until I saw an article in the Sunday New York Times magazine. A doctor accidentally put *Datura* leaves in her salad and was subsequently rushed to the emergency room with hallucinations and a host of unpleasant symptoms. She was

hospitalized for days. During the seventeenth century, there was an episode of British soldiers being poisoned in colonial Virginia, so it is also called “Jamestown weed.”

There is information on this gorgeous plant for landscapes – even use as a houseplant! Like so much else, it can be gloriously ornamental and dangerously toxic. We need to navigate between the two.

Dr. Angela O'Callaghan is the Social Horticulture Specialist for Clark County Cooperative Extension. Contact [ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu](mailto:ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu) or 702-257-5581.