

## **Beware the Toxic Jimsonweed**

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Jimson weed (*Datura stramonium*), also called thorn apple because of its spiky fruit, is an exotic looking plant with a trumpet-shaped flower that begins blooming in late summer and continues through the first frost. An herbaceous annual which can grow up to 5 feet tall, Jimsonweed has a pale green stem with spreading branches. The green to purplish leaves grow to a length of 3-8 inches, have an oval shape and are coarsely serrated along the edges. Seeds are contained in a hard, spiny capsule, about 2 inches in diameter, which splits lengthwise into four parts when ripe. Seeds can remain dormant in the soil for more than 40 years.

All parts of the plant are toxic, especially the seeds, which are dark brown in color and can potentially cause convulsions, hallucinations and even death if ingested. Poisons are present both in fresh and dried plant parts, such as hay or silage.

A member of the nightshade family, Jimsonweed is related to tomatoes, eggplant, pepper, tobacco and potatoes.

Jimsonweed grows worldwide and can be found in most of the continental US and in the southern Canadian provinces as well. It grows in cultivated fields, being a major weed in soybeans worldwide, and is common in overgrazed pastures, barnyards, cultivated fields and waste land.

The white to purple flowers are fragrant at night, attracting moths and other nocturnal pollinators. The rest of the plant, however, does not have a pleasant odor; therefore most animals avoid eating it. Accidental poisoning is more common among humans rather than animals, especially by children who can be attracted to its large, showy flowers. Accidental poisoning occurs in animals when other, more desirable plants or water are in short supply and they are hungry. Most animal poisonings, however, result from feed contamination when Jimsonweed is harvested with hay or silage and ends up poisoning the animal upon feeding. Seeds can contaminate grains and is the most common poisoning that occurs in chickens.

The name was derived from the town of Jamestown, Virginia where, in 1676, an uprising known as Bacon's Rebellion took place. British soldiers sent there to suppress the uprising ingested the weed in a stew and spent 11 days in altered mental states.

Early signs of poisoning include rapid pulse, restlessness, depression, rapid breathing, nervousness, dilated pupils, muscular twitching and diarrhea. Physicians encountering patients who have ingested Jimsonweed describe them as "red as a beet and mad as a hatter." Because of its toxic properties, the plant should be destroyed when found.