

Jimson Weed and other Plant Name Origins

By Pat Frey

Erie County Master Gardener

As I was looking up info on another topic, I came across an article on how the Jimson Weed got its name. I remember my dad “battling” the Jimson Weed in his northwest Ohio farm fields many years ago. Jimson Weed grows to be a large shrub that spreads easily and grows up to five feet tall if not checked early, with large smooth leaves and large trumpet-like tubular flowers. The Jimson Weed is an attractive plant, but not in a soybean or tomato field!

Jimson Weed got its name from the Jamestown Colony, the first continuous English colony on American soil, from an event back in 1676. This plant, *Datura stramonium*, grew in the Jamestown area and was used to make salves to treat burns. Nathaniel Bacon, a colonist in Jamestown, was unhappy with the colonial Governor, William Berkeley. Bacon organized the colonists into what became known as Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676, during which the colonists torched the Jamestown settlement. They captured Governor Berkeley and his men, and at one point, prepared a “boiled salad” made from the leaves of the *Datura stramonium*. The meal brought on “unexpected delusions and irrational behavior”, causing the men to be “incapacitated” for 11 days. <https://extension.wvu.edu/lawn-gardening-pests/weeds/jimsonweed> The event became “famous”, and the plant became known as the Jamestown Weed, and later as Jim’s Weed, or simply Jimson Weed. The plant actually contains high levels of atropine, hyoscyamine, and scopolamine—drugs that can kill, or in smaller amounts, cause nauseated delirium. Don’t try it in a boiled salad, or in anything else!

So, what about some other unusual plant names? Did you know that there is an orchid named for Oscar the Grouch of Sesame Street fame? *Stelis oscargrouchii* is the name accepted in 2015 by the Kew, one of the Royal Botanical Gardens in London, for a fuzzy orchid that apparently reminds some people of Oscar in his garbage can!

What about the Monkey Puzzle Tree? Garden enthusiasts of Victorian England thought that the tree’s spiky leaves, which cover the branches, would puzzle a monkey trying to climb the tree!

One of the easiest houseplants to grow is a *Dracaena trifasciata*, better known as a snake plant, or mother-in-law’s tongue. As you can probably guess, the spiky plant earned that latter common name because its sword-like leaves reminded “someone” of the stereotypical sharp tongue of a mother-in-law.

What about the Sneezewort (*Achillea ptarmica*)? This strong-scented flowering plant has been used to make sneezing powder, once believed to be a good way to clean out sinuses. The second part of the scientific name comes from the Greek word “ptairo” which means to cause sneezing.

The obedient plant (*Physostegia virginiana*) gets its name from its easy adaptability to both drought and poor drainage conditions. Also, the flowers, if manipulated back and forth on the stem will stay in the position in which they are placed.

Belladonna (*Atropa belladonna*), or deadly nightshade, earned its latter common name because the plant causes delirium, hallucinations, and death if eaten. Throughout history and literature, the plant has been the “poison of choice”. Back in Roman Empire days, it was rumored that the emperor Augustus was poisoned by his wife Livia using a potion made from the plant.

“Belladonna”, used in both the plant’s scientific and common names, means “beautiful woman”. Women in medieval days used the juice from the plant’s berries to make eyedrops to dilate their pupils. It was believed that the result caused the eyes to appear more attractive, but the eyedrops would also cause blurriness and an inability to focus. These would wear off over time, but prolonged use could cause permanent vision distortion or blindness. Quite a price for “beauty”!!!

Anyone up for “Botany Trivia”?