



*Jimson Weed, Tolguacha, or Thorn Apple (Datura meteloides) photographed at the old Silver King Mine near the Arboretum by Leslie Ely.*

**The Story of Jimson Weed.** Species of *Datura* grow on sites which are open, disturbed, sunny and often arid. Cowboys, desert dwellers or denizens of "waste places" often refer to the plants by the name *Jimson Weed*. This is in reality a contraction for "*Jamestown Weed*" (*Datura stramonium*), a plant which became infamous in colonial Virginia. In 1870 J. E. Dodge reported that "*Datura meteloides* grows abundantly in Arizona" and that "the Mohave Indians gather the leaves and roots, bruise and mix them with water." After being allowed to stand for several hours, "the liquid is drawn off. It is a highly narcotic drink, producing a stupefying effect." The California Indians "use a decoction of this species to stimulate young females in dancing." The Pah-Utes "... ferment in the sun a watery infusion of the bruised seeds, and drink the liquor for the purpose of intoxication." Pharmacologists Edward P. Claus and Varro E. Tyler discussed *D. stramonium* in 1965, recording that early settlers near Jamestown in colonial Virginia "used it as a 'pot herb' with fatal results." Charles F. Millsbaugh in 1892 characterized the Jamestown plant as growing in waste places or garbage heaps and noted that "... the American Aborigines named it *The White Man's Plant* ..." in allusion to its place of growth "... near the homes of the civilized." In 1922 L. H. Bailey wrote that at the "first successful settlement in America—Jamestown, Virginia, 1607 ..." the men ate

*Datura* "... with curious results. Capt. John Smith's account of their mad antics is very entertaining." The colonial historian Beverly (in *History of Virginia*, p. 121) recorded that soldiers sent to put down Bacon's Rebellion gathered the young sprouts and ate them as a pot herb, "the effect of which was a very pleasant comedy, for they turned natural fools upon it for several days. One would blow up a feather in the air; another would dart straws at it with fury; another, stark naked, was sitting up in a corner like a monkey, grinning and making maws at them; a fourth would fondly kiss and paw his companions." After eleven days they "... returned to themselves again, not remembering anything that had passed." Unfortunately many other records of *Datura*-eating list death as the end result. For example, in 1911 L. H. Pammell recorded a case where some boys "... imagined themselves Indians and roamed about and ate parts of various plants ..." including Jimson Weed. "One died in a state of wild delirium; another was saved after heroic treatment ..." Pammell also recorded the poisoning of five children who had eaten *Datura* growing in a garden "under the fanciful trade name of Night-blooming Cactus." *Daturas* have become spread as weeds throughout much of the world and several authors have stated that "Thugs" and "Assassins" in India poisoned people with them in furtherance of their criminal activity.