

Atropa belladonna

[Synonyms : *Atropa acuminata*]

DEADLY NIGHTSHADE is a perennial. Native to Europe, the Mediterranean and Asia, it has small, lurid violet or purplish-brown flowers.

It is also known as Apples of Sodom, Banewort, *Beladono* (Esperanto), *Belladone* (French), *Belladonna* (English, Finnish, Italian, Swedish), *Belle-dame* (Creole), *Black cherry*, *Bouton noir* (French), *Chrysanthème au dgiâbl'ye* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Codwarth* (Welsh), *Daft berries*, *Deadly dwale*, *Death's herb*, *Devil's berry*, *Devil's cherries*, *Devil's herb*, *Devil's rhubarb*, *Divale*, *Dog-berry*, *Doleful bells*, *Dwal*, *Dwale*, *Dwayberry*, *Enchanter's nightshade*, *Fair lady*, *Galnebær* (Danish), *Great morel*, *Jacob's ladder*, *Jacob's stee*, *Love apples*, *L 'ul'kovec zlomocný* (Slovak), *Maszlagos nadragulya* (Hungarian), *Murderer's cherry*, *Naughty man's cherries*, *Nightshade*, *Poison black cherry*, *Rulik zlomocný* (Czech), *Sag angur* (Hindi, Kashmiri), *Satan's cherries*, *Schwarze Tollkirsche* (German), *Sleeping nightshade*, *Sleeping powders*, *Sorcerer's cherry*, *Sorcerer's herb*, *Tollkirsche* (German), *Witch's berry*, *Wolfskers* (Dutch), and *Yabrooj* (Urdu); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of fatal gift, loneliness, and silence.

The flowers are pollinated by bumble-bees.

Warning – all parts of the plant are extremely poisonous (especially roots and seeds) affecting the nervous system. It can cause flushed skin, dry mouth, loss of voice, rapid heartbeat, weak pulse, dizziness, constipation, hallucination, widened pupils, trembling and excitement, delirium, respiratory failure, coma and death. The plant can only be used by a qualified practitioner. In Britain this is viewed as a 'prescription only medicine' or is obtainable from a registered pharmacist at reduced strength. The plant is poisonous for many animals, with the certain exception of rabbits. (Occasional poisoning has been known to occur in humans and animals through eating the flesh of rabbits and birds that themselves have devoured parts of the plant.)

Deadly nightshade's fruit has been confused with bilberries (*Vaccinium myrtillus*). Its flowers and leaves can be confused with those of woody nightshade (*Solanum dulcamara*).

Belladonna is Italian meaning 'beautiful or pretty lady'.

Venetian and Spanish ladies used a distilled water from the roots of the toxic plant to dilate the pupils in the hope of making their eyes more appealing. It is said that it was this that led the Venetian physician and botanist, Pietro Andrea Matthioli (1501-1577) also known as Matthiolus to call the plant *Herba bella donna*. Its ocular use led to some blurred vision and damaged eyes.

Greek mythology describes how deadly nightshade was used by the maenads (the female followers) during orgies in the name of Dionysus, god of wine. Under its influence their eyes dilated and they gave themselves to male worshippers in wild abandon. While under the god's Roman guise of Bacchus celebrants often drank wine that had been adulterated with deadly nightshade too.

The Greek historian, Plutarch (c.46-c.120) describes the Parthian Wars (in 36 and 34 BC) and how the men under the leadership of the Roman triumvir, Marcus Antonius (c.83-30 BC) had been killed by deadly nightshade which they probably drank from poisoned wells left

by the retreating opposition. A similar event to that described by Plutarch was also recorded by the Scottish scholar and humanist, George Buchanan (c.1506-1582). He tells of how the Scots in about 1035 under their leader, Duncan I (c.1010-1040), agreed a truce with Sweno then added the juice of deadly nightshade to the Danish army's rations. When the poison had taken effect the Scots destroyed most of the invading force. 15th Century Italy also featured deadly nightshade in its political machinations. This was the period when the Borgia family held sway and supping with prominent people could be tantamount to the death penalty. Apparently the Borgias kept vials of deadly nightshade in easily accessible niches for surreptitious addition to fresh fruit as needed.

Deadly nightshade (more than any other plant) was the subject of much superstition during the Middle Ages in Europe with a formidable contradictory reputation for powers both benign and malignant.. It was included in the traditional witches' nostrum (with monk's-hood (*Aconitum napellus*) and other ingredients) for which one of the hallucinatory effects was the sensation of flying – which goes some way to explain why it was associated so strongly with witches and their broomsticks. Both human beings and cattle could be protected from enchantment with a necklace or collar of the plant, and this could also be used to cure any horse which had been ridden by a witch, or prevent teething problems for babies. But gathering the nightshade could be fraught with danger as it was said that the devil watched over it night and day. Thus a diversion was needed which was usually achieved by releasing a black hen just before the deadly nightshade was picked, or alternatively the plant was collected on Walpurgis Night (30th April in Germany) when the devil was busy preparing for the witches' sabbath.

Although it is extremely poisonous for human beings, animals particularly rabbits sometimes graze on the leaves with impunity and birds (especially pheasants) eat the berries.

Medicinally, herbalists used to recommend the plant as a remedy for nervous diarrhoea and in addition to nervous diseases generally, incontinence, whooping cough, paralysis, gout and rheumatism. It was also used as an antidote for nerve gas poisoning and it was used by ophthalmologists to dilate the pupil as an aid to eye examinations prior to cataract operations.

Used only by qualified practitioners today deadly nightshade can be part of a treatment for reducing certain glandular secretions, in the form of a liniment it can be recommended for gout or rheumatic inflammation, and it can also be used for treating wind. Today it is used commercially in proprietary plasters and medicines (including travel sickness pills) and also in ophthalmological preparations.

It is the birthday flower for 15th July.