

*Datura innoxia*

[Synonyms : *Bruckenthalia meteloides*, *Datura guayaquilensis*, *Datura innoxia*, *Datura meteloides*]

**SACRED DATURA** is a shrub. Native to south-western North America and to Mexico, it has long and sweet-scented, ivory, pink or violetish flowers.

It is also known as *Amerikansk spikklubba* (Swedish), Angel's trumpet, *Belladone* (West Indian), *Concombre diable* (West Indian), Datura, Devil's trumpet, Downy thorn apple, *Durman neškodný* (Czech), Gabriel's trumpet, Indian apple, Jamestown weed, *Mexikansk spikklubba* (Swedish), Moonflower, Pain killer, Prickly burr, Prickly datura, Recurved thornapple, Selguacha, Southwestern thornapple, *Toloachi* (Mexican), Western jimson, Wild trumpet, and Wonga.

The flowers open at night and droop and close shortly after sunrise.

Warning – all parts are poisonous, including pollen but especially the seeds. The plant can cause dilated pupils, fever, thirst, hot skin, headaches, rapid pulse, inco-ordination and confusion. It is also poisonous for animals.

*Innoxia* is Latin (innocuous, harmless) meaning 'not spiny, or unarmed'.

Records indicate that sacred datura and related species were used in different ways by various American Indian tribes. Although early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the Hopi North American Indians claimed that they did not use datura in any form, researchers found evidence that even then Hopi medicine men could still be found who would administer the root to patients, with fatal results – and from this fact authorities deduced that the plant was employed by the Hopi no less than other local tribes in earlier centuries. For the Zuni sacred datura meant both a medicine and a medium for encouraging rain or for identifying a thief. It was only handled by certain members of the Zuni tribe (medicine men and rain priests) and it was administered with considerable care and respect.

Zuni medicine men preceded treatment with a ritual tribute of prayer plumes to ensure success and records describe an operation on a woman's breast that was witnessed by a European researcher. Unconscious after receiving the powdered root the patient's breast was cut open. Pus was removed and a dirty cloth was bandaged round the wound that had previously been sprinkled with antiseptic. The woman eventually awoke to admit that she had had beautiful dreams and she appeared to display no ill effects. It was the Zuni rain priests who not only performed the rain ceremonies but also the rituals enabling a victim to identify the culprit who had stolen from him. Like the medicine men the rain priests had to precede such ceremonies with complicated ritual prayer plume offerings. This plant is sacred for the Zuni as explained in one of their legends. It tells how a brother and sister from the centre of the earth joyfully walked the earth's surface until they annoyed the twin sons of the Sun Father, known as the Divine Ones. The latter banished the happy children from the earth's surface and sacred datura is supposed to have sprung up from the place where they disappeared inside the earth never to return.

Several tribes pick out the flower on leather headbands and although early authorities suggested this was the squash flower (*Cucurbita maxima*), more recent researchers believe it represents datura. In contrast to the Zuni's reverence, the Mohave tribe are believed to have made a stupefying and poisonous drink from the root and leaves, and the Paiute are

believed to have got drunk on a concoction made by fermenting the bruised seeds. The rain priests of the modern Tarahumara tribe, who are the only people in that tribe who are allowed to touch sacred datura, add roots, leaves and seeds to a ceremonial drink made from maize (*Zea*).