

*Datura metel*

[Synonyms : *Datura alba*, *Datura chlorantha*, *Datura cornucopia*, *Datura fastuosa*, *Datura fastuosa* var. *alba*, *Datura humilis*]

**PRICKLY BUR** is an annual. Native to tropical Asia (particularly southern China and India) it has large, sometimes mauve-tinged, ivory-coloured flowers.

It is also known as Angel's trumpets, *Asiatischer Stechapfel* (German), Black datura, Datura, Devil's trumpet, *Dhatura* (Bengali), *Dhustura* (Sanskrit), Double yellow angel's trumpet, Downy thorn apple, Entire-leaved thorn-apple, Garden thorn apple, Hairy thorn-apple, Hindu datura, Hoary thorn-apple, Horn of plenty, *Indischer Stechapfel* (German), *Indisk spikkklubba* (Swedish), Jimson weed, *Kachubong* (Javanese), *Kechubong* (Malay), *Kuchubung* (Sundanese), *Kwasea-dua* (Twi), *Lam-pong* (Thai), Metel, *Pio-dhaturo* (Gujarati), *Sadah-dhatura* (Hindi), *Sakran* (Arabic), *Stechapfel* (German), *Stramonjum abjad* (Maltese), Thorn apple, Trumpet flower, *Unmetta* (Tamil), *Vellum-mattai* (Tamil), White datura, and Yellow angel's trumpet.

The flowers are often double, one inside the other.

Warning – the whole plant is poisonous, including the pollen but particularly the seeds. It can cause extreme oral discomfort, blurred vision, fever, increased pulse rate, hallucinations, delirium, paralysis, coma and death. It is also poisonous for animals.

*Metel* is said to be a local Arabic name for the fruit of *Datura metel*.

Both Chinese and Sanskrit records refer to prickly bur's hallucinatory qualities. In the Himalayas and countries in south-eastern Asia, even today, prickly bur seeds are sometimes smoked with tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*) or cannabis (hemp, *Cannabis sativa*).

In the 1980s some scientists produced a Paper on drugs used in the practice of zombiism after a real case had presented itself for their detailed scrutiny. This Paper provides a documented description of the rites for which Haiti is infamous, and which involve prickly bur and to a lesser extent thorn-apple (*Datura stramonium*). The victim's skin is touched with a potion containing prickly bur and a puffer fish extract as the significant ingredients. This poisonous concoction (that includes several other potentially lethal ingredients) is prepared by what some authorities have called the 'zombie maker' and must require considerable skill as it is said that there have been relatively few accidental deaths from its preparation or use. The potion causes skin irritation and the inevitable scratching only helps to hasten its absorption and rapidly the victim assumes the appearance of death – although only paralysed and completely aware of his surroundings (which surely must be a horrific experience). In 1963 in the case in question the then young victim was declared dead despite experienced medical attention in the local hospital that had been unable to identify the cause of his coma. Mourning relatives buried him in the local cemetery where much later he was disinterred and revived with an antidote also made from several of the *Datura* species. His captors then sold him into slavery on distant sugar plantations. Twenty years later he sought out his family and was able to convince them that he was alive. He claimed that his brother had arranged the whole episode and he also enabled scientists to investigate his experiences. Most victims never returned from slavery however, not only because of the nightmarish experiences

they had already undergone but also because they realized the trauma and uncertainty that could be inflicted upon their relatives and friends if they attempted to return from the dead.

Prickly bur is believed to have predated thorn-apple (*Datura stramonium*) in its arrival in Europe. It is said to have been growing in Venice in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> Century when Venetians called it *stramonio*.

In Africa the stems have been used for fencing, and the pounded plant used to be daubed on the floors of houses to kill intruders such as lice. Apparently some African tribes have found that palm oil is an effective antidote if anyone has poisoned themselves with prickly bur. The plant has also been used by some tribes during ordeal ceremonies initiating manhood.

The Arabian philosopher and physician, Avicenna (980-1037) was familiar with prickly bur's medicinal uses.

It has been said that in some parts of India nursing mothers used to poison their newborn daughters by smearing their own breasts with juice from the plant's leaves. In equally sinister vein prickly bur is said to have been used in India by members of a fanatical and murderous body known as the Thugs to stupefy their targets. Such use was not confined to India of course and records show similar practices in other parts of south-eastern Asia. But in contrast this plant has also been viewed as an aphrodisiac in south-eastern Asian islands, particularly the five small islands of the Moluccas – a fact that is said to have been reported in Europe in 1578.

Medicinally, in the past it has been used to treat fevers, tumours, mental disorders, diarrhoea, some venereal diseases and eye and skin diseases. The flower juice also acquired a reputation for being able to cure rabies and was dropped into the ear to ease earache. Today bruised leaves are used locally as an external treatment for ulcers, piles, rheumatism and arthritis. In India the dried leaves are smoked as a remedy for asthma.