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Karwinskia humboldtiana

COYOTILLO is a shrub or tree. Native to south-western North America (particularly California and Texas) it has small, greenish flowers.

It is also known as Humboldt coytillo.

Warning – the seeds (but less so the leaves or fruit pulp) are poisonous and can affect the motor nervous system. They can cause (after a period of days or even weeks) weakness, leg inco-ordination and paralysis.

Humboldtiana commemorates the German explorer and naturalist, Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) who explored South and Central America from 1799 to 1804 with the French botanist, Aimé Bonpland (1773-1858) studying flora, fauna and topography, collecting botanical, zoological, geological and ethnographic specimens. In 1797, when he inherited a substantial income, he resigned his post as a government inspector of mines in Prussia (during which he had established a school for miners, made health improvements, invented safety equipment including a safety lamp, and carried out many scientific experiments) and travelled in Europe, as well as planning and preparing for the South American expedition. During the exploration von Humboldt mapped over 1700 miles of the Orinoco River (and also discovered the connection between the Amazon and the Orinoco), ascended mountains in the Andes and studied their structure, made meteorological observations that would lead to discoveries about meteor showers, studied tropical storms, terrestrial magnetic forces and volcanology, discovered and studied the cold Peruvian Current in the Pacific Ocean on the west coast of South America (once called the Humboldt Current), and examined the fertilisation properties of Peruvian guano. In 1803 they explored Mexico and returning to Europe via Washington von Humboldt met Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), the 3rd President of the United States, on several occasions forming a lasting friendship. In 1808 he settled in Paris, wrote of their travels in the Americas (31 volumes) and continued research into geomagnetism (leading to the discovery of the magnetic poles). By 1827 however his finances had been drained by his expeditions and publication of his reports, and he moved to Berlin where he became advisor to the King of Prussia, Frederick William III (1770-1840). His Berlin public lectures from 1827-1828 proved to be extremely popular. Then in 1829 he explored Russia and Siberia, discovered permafrost and recommended the establishment of weather observatories across Russia to Alaska. These gave him data which led to his theory about more extreme climates in continental interiors unmoderated by ocean influences, and he developed the first isotherm map. He received many honorary doctorates, orders and medals, and was a member of the American Philosophical Society. Species of flora and fauna, places and geographical features, and academic institutions have been named after him. His published works include *Voyage de Humboldt et Bonpland aux Regions Equinoxiales, Asie Centrale, Géographie du nouveau continent*, and *Kosmos*.

Apparently North American Indian tribes were well aware that the berries could cause paralysis.

Today the flesh of the berry-like fruit is considered by many to be edible despite its declared poisonous nature.

In Mexico the seeds are used in the treatment of tetanus.