

Lophophora williamsii

[Synonyms : *Anhalonium lewinii*, *Anhalonium williamsii*, *Echinocactus lewinii*, *Echinocactus lewisii*, *Echinocactus williamsii*, *Echinocactus williamsii* var. *luteus*, *Lophophora diffusa* subsp. *fricii*, *Lophophora echinata*, *Lophophora fricii*, *Lophophora jourdaniana*, *Lophophora lewinii*, *Lophophora lutea*, *Lophophora williamsii* var. *echinata*, *Lophophora williamsii* var. *fricii*, *Lophophora williamsii* var. *lewinii*, *Lophophora williamsii* var. *lutea*, *Mammillaria lewinii*, *Mammillaria williamsii*, *Peyotl zacatensis* var. *fricii*]

MESCAL BUTTONS is a spineless cactus. Native to southern Texas (United States) and to northern Mexico, it has occasional and small, daisy-like, pale pink to white flowers.

It is also known as *Anhalonium*, Devil's root, Dumpling cactus, *Hikuri* (Mexican Indian), *Lofofora williamsova* (Slovak), *Maka* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian), Mescal, *Pejotlo* (Esperanto), Pellote, Peyote (English, German), Peyote button, Peyotl (English, German), and Sacred mushroom.

Some plants have many crowns as other crowns often grow in place of one that is cut off.

Warning – cannot be taken internally unless prescribed by a qualified practitioner. It can cause visual disturbance, dilated pupils, muscular relaxation, hallucination, loss of sense of time, partial anaesthesia, wakefulness, nausea, vomiting and collapse. In Britain this is a Controlled Drug and is a prescription only medicine.

North American Indian legend tells how an Indian was travelling through the desert and lost his way. He was dying of hunger and thirst and in his desperation he decided to try and eat the tough, unpalatable cactus. To his great relief he found that it renewed his strength and he was able to find his way back to his people and tell them of this new god of healing.

Indian belief in the god (or messenger of the gods), Peyote, survives to this day. It is said that his ritual was revealed by him in a vision to the people and that he communicates with an individual without the need for an intermediary such as a priest. The religious practices of over thirty Indian tribes (found from Mexico to Saskatchewan, including the Omaha, Paiute, Huicol, Ponca, Comanche, Blackfoot, and Winnebago) involve the use of mescal buttons. The Mexican Huicol tribe are probably the greatest proponents of the practice. Led by a shaman ten to fifteen members still make a sacred annual pilgrimage into the Sierra Madre Occidental, a distance of around 200 miles, to gather the prized mescal buttons. Prior to their journey to what is for them Paradise the participants confess their sins and receive absolution – and the pilgrimage itself involves additional sacred practices. On their return their baskets are brimming with mescal buttons and these are not only used by their own tribe but are often sold to others such as the Tarahumara or the Cora. The ceremonies of all the tribes are similar and are believed to be little altered from those of centuries ago.

Accounts of Spanish missionaries show that it was part of ritual for the tribes in northern Mexico in the 16th Century, but Indian legends indicate its use long before that in at least 5000 BC. The Spanish conquerors realized that the religious peyote rituals were a significant obstacle to any conversions to Roman Catholic Christianity and many attempts were made to restrain the plant's use. In 1692 in what is now the Mexican State of Coahuila, across the border from Texas in the United States, local Indian tribes

established a new mission called *El Santo de Jesus Peyotes* – and by this time it was becoming apparent that dried slices of peyote were often blessed instead of bread as the Eucharist of the Mass. By the 18th Century continued efforts by succeeding European settlers to contain the varied practices had still met with little success and in 1720 a law was even brought in which banned the drug. This was all to no avail as the observance just continued underground. Outward appearances suggested that some of the Indians had embraced the Europeans' Christianity but in private most maintained their own rituals. They saw no conflict between the religious practices, the individual tenets of which even seemed to them to be enhanced by the other. In the 1880s the Comanches and the Kiowas made raids across the Mexican border. During these forays they learnt about the drug and some of the associated rituals which began to creep through many of the Indian tribes further north in North America.

Not only is peyote used in ritual to induce visions (brilliantly coloured hallucinations) and a feeling of weightlessness, but it is also taken to ease pain and encourage healing, enhance resilience during bouts of dancing and boost courage in the face of battle. In 1963 a ruling was made in the Supreme Court of California which recognized that any prohibition on the Indian use of mescal buttons would be an infringement of religious freedom. The cross between American Indian religious practice and Christianity came to be known in North America as the Native American Church and only members of it (today about 250,000) are legally permitted to take the drug. Within this framework peyote is usually consumed as part of a contemplative ritual. Despite this demand for it is so great that mescal button plants are said to be under threat of extinction and are believed to grow now in only a few areas in the northern Continent.

Apart from the Delaware North American tribe (who believed that pieces of cactus worn round the neck in a little beaded bag kept illness at bay) several others viewed the plant as a more conventional source of medicine. The Kiowa for instance used it to treat fever, tuberculosis, pneumonia, scarlet fever, colds, cuts, bruising, rheumatism and venereal diseases – and despite their precautions (already referred to) the Delaware are said to have used it as a treatment for pneumonia. The North American Omaha Indians used mescal buttons in the treatment of alcohol addiction

Medicinally, it has been recommended in the past by herbalists for treating various nervous disorders, gout, rheumatism and neuralgia. Today however many Western authorities believe it is of little medicinal value.