

Nicotiana glauca

[Synonyms : *Nicotiana arborea*, *Nicotiana glauca* var. *angustifolia*, *Nicotiana glauca* var. *grandiflora*, *Nicotidendron glauca*, *Siphaulax glabra*]

TREE TOBACCO is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native from southern Bolivia to northern Argentina it has cream to yellowish-green flowers.

It is also known as *Blåtobak* (Swedish), *Blaugrüner Tabak* (German), *Busktobak* (Swedish), Desert tree tobacco, Glauous tobacco, Indian tobacco, Mexican tobacco, Mustard tree, Shrub tobacco, *Tabac bleu* (French), *Tabac glauque* (French), *Tabaco moro* (Canary Island), *Tabakk tas-Swar* (Maltese), *Tabák sivý* (Czech), *Tabaqueira azul* (Portuguese), Tobacco bush, Tobacco tree, *Tobaksbusk* (Danish), *Venenero* (Canary Island), *Wilde Tabak* (Afrikaans), and Yellow tree tobacco.

The flowers are pollinated by moths.

Warning – all parts are poisonous and symptoms include respiratory paralysis, slowed pulse, vomiting, diarrhoea and dizziness. There have been reports (in Hawaii, as well as in California in the south-western United States) of children being poisoned from sucking the flowers. There have also been some reports of poisoning when tree tobacco has been picked in mistake for cabbage (*Brassica oleracea* var. *capitata*) and cooked as a vegetable. It is poisonous for livestock but as it is unpalatable would normally be avoided by them.

Glauca is derived from Latin *glaucus* (bluish-grey, greenish-grey) meaning ‘covered with a fine, powdery whitish coating’.

It seems that some American Indian tribes were calling the plant *marihuana* when the first Spanish conquerors landed on American shores ie. long before Europeans applied this name to hemp derivatives, and the Spanish corruption of this local name was ‘Maria Juana’ or ‘Mary Jane’.

There have been some claims that these waxy, bluish-green leaves were once eaten locally as a vegetable (presumably by South American Indian tribes – and some say similarly in Rhodesia, today’s Zimbabwe, as well) but the truth of this assertion is in considerable doubt.

Certainly local South American Indian tribes used to smoke the leaves as tobacco. The North American Cahuilla and the Diegueño Indians smoked the leaves as well and the former also chewed them as tobacco and made them into a decoction for a beverage.

In fact for the Cahuilla Indians it seems that tree tobacco was of much significance as it featured prominently in many of their rituals. Travellers who smoked the leaves were believed to experience protective blessings on their journeys and they were also smoked as part of hunting ritual. The plant played an important role too in tribal practices associated with the health of all its members, the likelihood of good harvests and the assurance of appropriate rainfall.

Apart from the foregoing the North American Cahuillas, together with the Mahuna tribe, turned to tree tobacco as a source of medicine. Leaf poultices were used by both. The former applied them to wounds, bruises and swellings while the latter believed that they offered a remedy for some forms of tuberculosis and that they could ease oral glandular

inflammation. Smoke from the leaves was used by the Cahuilla tribe to ease earache and an infusion of them was prescribed to cause vomiting.

Despite its poisonous qualities the plant is said to be a source of food for some humming birds. Tree tobacco has also been used for making insecticides.

It is interesting to note authorities have reported that some Ethiopian farmers believe tree tobacco was introduced to parts of that Country by the desert locust which dropped seeds there after feasting on the plant elsewhere on that Continent.

Today it is cultivated as an ornamental garden plant.

Medicinally, steamed leaf poultices have been applied to wounds and swellings as part of local treatment – and have also been applied to ease rheumatism.