

Solanum dulcamara

[Synonyms : *Dulcamara flexuosa*]

WOODY NIGHTSHADE is a perennial (sometimes climbing or trailing). Native to Asia and Europe it has small and wide, green-spotted, bright yellow-centred, violet flowers. It is also known as *Amer-dou* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Amièrdoux* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Anabessalib* (Persian), Apple of Sodom, *Besksöta* (Swedish), Bitter nightshade, *Bittersød Natskygge* (Danish), *Bittersüss* (German), *Bittersüsser Nachtschatten* (German), Bittersweet, Bittersweet nightshack, Bittersweet herb, Bittersweet nightshade, *Bitterzoet* (Dutch), Blue bindweed, Blue nightshade, Climbing nightshade, Clinging nightshade, *Codwarth Caled* (Welsh), Deadly nightshade, *Doce-amarga* (Portuguese), Dogwood, *Dolĉamaro* (Esperanto), *Douce-amère* (French), Dulcamara (English, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish), European bittersweet, Fellen, Fellenwort, Fellow, Felonwood, Felonwort, Fever twig, Fool's cap, Garden nightshade, Granny's nightcap, Halfwood, *Kakmachi* (Sanskrit), *Kvesved* (Swedish), *Lilek potměchut'* (Czech), *Lul'ok sladkohorký* (Slovak), Mad dog's berries, *Morelle douce-amère* (French), Mortal, Myrtle vine, Nightshade, Nightshade vine, Poison berry, Poison bittersweet, Poison flower, Poisonous nightshade, Poison tea plant, *Punakoiso* (Finnish), Radical weed, Robin-run-the-hedge, *Rubabarik* (Punjabi), Scarlet berry, Scarlet bloom, Scarlet eggplant, Scaw-coo, Shady night, Small bittersweet, Snakeberry, Snake flower, Snake's food, Snake's meat, Snake's poison-food, Staff vine, Terrydiddle, Terrydivil, Tetherdevil, Violet bloom, *Vivang* (Swedish), Witch flower, Wolf grape, and Woody; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of truth.

Warning – woody nightshade can only be used by a qualified practitioner as all parts of the plant are poisonous. It can affect the central nervous system and can cause abdominal pain, vomiting, headaches, constipation or diarrhoea, cramp, weakness, thirst, breathing difficulties, trembling, drowsiness, paralysis of the tongue, loss of speech, coma and death. In Britain it is only available through a registered pharmacist. It is poisonous for some animals which normally avoid it.

Woody nightshade's flowers and leaves can be confused with those of black nightshade (*Solanum nigrum*) and deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*). The flowers are also similar to those of the potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) but the potato's are larger and paler.

Dulcamara is derived from Latin *dulci-* (sweet, pleasant, delightful) and *amari-* (bitter) components meaning 'bittersweet' with reference to the initial bitter taste and the sweet after-taste of the twigs and is a Latin name for woody nightshade. In the Middle Ages the name was written in a logical order ie. *amaradulcis*, reflecting the changing fashion.

The English name Woody nightshade was chosen by the old herbalists to distinguish the plant from deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*). The name Felonwort arose from its use as a cure for abscesses (known as 'felons') upon which cut open berries were/are bandaged.

Woody nightshade appears on the third collarette of Tut'ankhamun's third coffin and shows the fruit threaded on strips of date-leaf (*Phoenix dactylifera*). Tut'ankhamun died in about 1340 BC.

Like so many other plants woody nightshade has its share of superstition in Europe. In the Middle Ages sheep could be seen wearing a necklace of woody nightshade put there by

the shepherd in order to protect the animal from the evil eye. While horses which looked hag-ridden wore collars of woody nightshade mixed with holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) and in Lincolnshire the English similarly adorned pigs. In fact in several European countries it seems that woody nightshade necklaces were believed effective protection for both man and beast.

After woody nightshade had reached North America it was absorbed into the medicinal repertoire of a few of the Indian tribes, including some of the Delaware. Authorities have noted that the Nootka, Malecite, Iroquois and Micmac tribes all took it for treating stomach upsets and some of the Delaware Indians included it as an ingredient in a potion taken to ease fever.

Medicinally, although all parts of the plant were known to be poisonous (some more so than others) after appropriate preparation records show that by at least the 13th Century in Britain it was recommended by herbalists for various ailments such as the removal of warts and the treatment of skin conditions including those caused by syphilis. In the early 18th Century the celebrated Dutch physician and botanist, Hermann Boerhaave (1668-1738) was proclaiming the virtues of woody nightshade over sarsaparilla (*Smilax aristolochiaefolia*) as a tonic. It was not until very much later that Century however that Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778), the Swedish naturalist and physician (probably best known for devising the classification system for plants and animals still used today) eventually decided that woody nightshade had any desirable medicinal qualities and recommended it for treating fever, rheumatism and other inflammatory diseases. In the last 50 years however apart from possible homoeopathic remedies the plant has generally fallen into disuse medicinally, although it seems that relatively recent research has indicated that it could be the source of several hormonal-type drugs, and it can be an ingredient in some proprietary medicines.

It is the birthday flower for 19th July.