

Solanum nigrum

[Synonyms : *Solanum guineense*, *Solanum humile*, *Solanum nigrum* var. *atriplicifolium*, *Solanum nodiflorum*, *Solanum ptercaulon*]

BLACK NIGHTSHADE is an annual (occasionally biennial). Native to Europe it has pale violet or white flowers with yellow stamens.

It is also known as *Agoman* (Creole), Black berry, Blueberry, Bonewort, *Codwarth Du* (Welsh), Common nightshade, *Crève-chien* (French), *Crève-coeur* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), Deadly nightshade, Duscle, *Erva-moira* (Portuguese), Felonwort, Garden huckleberry, Garden nightshade, *Gheneb id-dib* (Maltese), Hound's berry, *Inab-aththa 'lab* (Arabic), Ink balls, *Kakamachi* (Sanskrit), *Kakmachi* (Bengali), *Kamanchi* (Telugu), *Keyee awit* (Ethiopian), *Leuncha* (Sundanese), *Lilek černý* (Czech), *Lul'ok čierny* (Slovak), *Mako* (Punjabi), *Makoh* (Urdu), *Makoi* (Hindi), *Managu* (Kikuyu), *Manattakkali* (Tamil), *Mochlys duon* (Welsh), Morel, *Morella* (Italian), *Morelle noire* (French), *Mustakoiso* (Finnish), *Nachtschade* (Dutch), *Nastergal* (Afrikaans), *Nattskatta* (Swedish), *Nech awit* (Ethiopian), Nightshade, Petty morel, Poisonberry, Poison weed, *Popolo* (Hawaiian), *Poroporo* (Maori), Prairie huckleberry, *Ranti* (Javanese, Malay), *Raupeti* (Maori), *Remuroa* (Maori), *Schwarzer Nachtschatten* (German), *Solano negro* (Spanish), *Solano nigra* (Esperanto), Stubbleberry, Stubby berry, Sunberry, *Tikur awit* (Ethiopian), *Trompillo*, *Vèrjus au dgiâbl'ye* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), and Wonder-berry; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of death, falsehood, obscurity, scepticism, sorcery, and witchcraft.

Warning - black nightshade can only be used under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. The whole plant is poisonous in some regions (its potency is actually variable and usually unpredictable) for humans and most animals (the latter usually avoid it). When poisonous it can cause abdominal pain, nausea, colic, breathing difficulties, diarrhoea, raised body temperature, headache, dizziness, speech impediment, vomiting, delirium, altered pulse rate, unconsciousness and death. (The extreme symptoms are rare.)

Black nightshade's flowers can be confused with those of woody nightshade (*Solanum dulcamara*) although those of this species are smaller, and they can also be confused with those of deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*). The flowers are also similar to those of the potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) – but the potato's are larger.

Nigrum means 'black' with reference to the colour of the mature berries.

On sites in Britain archaeologists have found black nightshade remains which show that the plant must have been familiar there in the Palaeolithic period well over 10,000 years ago.

Black nightshade can create problems for farmers as harvested crops of peas (*Pisum*), beans or maize (*Zea*) can be adulterated easily by the inadvertent collection of black nightshade berries or the juice from the squashed berries if the plant is growing amongst them. In addition the seeds of black nightshade can unintentionally be collected with crop seeds such as sugar beet (*Beta vulgaris* subsp. *vulgaris*) and thus be included in subsequent sowings. Canneries and frozen food processors all have to take particular care to ensure that the berries are excluded.

The species' potency is so variable that it has led to conflicting reports claiming either that it is edible or that it is poisonous. (Allied to this, inconsistent recognition may contribute to

possible confusion between very closely related species of similar appearance.) On the Island of Mauritius and the French island of Réunion (as also in a large part of south-eastern Asia) people have cooked and eaten the leaves like spinach (*Spinacia oleracea*) without ill effects. Maoris continue to serve the plant safely in this way today (and make the ripe berries into jam) as do South Africans. The young leaves are eaten as a cooked vegetable and the ripe fruit also provide food in northern India. In the 1940s the United States War Department recommended the cooked leafy shoots and raw, ripe black berries as a survival food. And again as a vegetable the plant is cooked and eaten still in Central Africa, the West Indies and Greece. In fact in Greece they have also eaten the raw berries for over 2,000 years and on the other side of the planet Hawaiians accepted them too without concern as part of their diet. (Today there are even cultivated varieties of black nightshade available.) But in Britain the plant is held to be poisonous.

In India black nightshade is employed by the rain doctors in charms and medicines.

Records note that once the plant had established itself in North America several Indian tribes such as the Cherokee added young leaves to the pot as a vegetable and others, including the Tubatulabal and the Mendocino Indian ate the fruit.

Some of the Chippewa tribe used the plant in ceremonial ritual.

Several Indian tribes including the Iroquois turned to it as a source of medicine – although there were those such as the Karok, Rappahannock and the Mendocino Indian who believed the plant was poisonous. Despite their fears however the Rappahannock did take a weak, dried leaf infusion for insomnia. It was used by the Cherokee to cause vomiting, Houma Indians used it for worms, sore eyes were washed with it by Miwok Indians, and some of the Delaware tribe employed it for treating venereal disease. Both the Houma and Costanoan Indians applied it to skin disorders, and the latter also used it for treating scarlet fever and toothache.

Folk medicine used to include black nightshade in the treatment of epilepsy and spasms. It was also recommended by herbalists as a remedy used externally for treating earache, ringworm and gout, and as an ingredient in an ointment for soothing inflamed eyes. In Kenya the juice has been used to heal wounds, and in India the fruit have provided remedies for fever, diarrhoea and eye disorders. The Chinese have used the leaf, stalk and roots on wounds. Today the plant is used in homoeopathic treatments.

It is the birthday flower for 23rd January.