

Sophora secundiflora

[Synonyms : *Agastianis secundiflora*, *Broussonetia secundiflora*, *Calia erythrosperma*, *Calia secundiflora*, *Calia secundiflora* subsp. *albofoliolata*, *Cladrastis secundiflora*, *Dermatophyllum speciosum*, *Sophora sempervirens*, *Sophora speciosa*, *Virgilia secundiflora*]

MESCALBEAN is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to south-western North America and Mexico it has small strongly violet-scented, pea-like, purple flowers.

It is also known as Coral bean, *Frijolillo* (Spanish), Mountain laurel, Red bean, Texas mountain laurel, and Whiskey bean.

Warning – mescalbean has hard fruit pods containing extremely poisonous beans (seeds). (Undamaged seeds will pass through the body without effect.) The seeds can cause nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, headaches, hallucinations, delirium, nervous excitement, sleep lasting for days and death.

Secundiflora means ‘one-sided’ with reference to the flowers.

Archaeologists have found mescalbean remains dating back to 1500 BC particularly in the Rio Grande basin.

The Plains Indians of North America have used the dried poisonous beans to make necklaces and they were once used to induce hallucinations during the Red Bean Dance. The Comanche have also worn these hard bright-red beans as ornaments during ceremonial rituals.

It was common even earlier in the 20th Century for men in both the Kiowa and the Comanche tribes to wear mescalbeans on their buckskin leggings as a protection should they inadvertently step on menstrual blood. The poisonous seeds have also been used as symbols during Peyote rituals, and crushed they have been added to Agave brandy to increase its potency.

Even as recently as the 1950s it was said that locally a wife or good pony might be exchanged for a six foot string of these seeds.

Despite its acknowledged extremely poisonous nature North American Indian tribes have used mescalbean medicinally. The Kickapoo applied a decoction of carefully strained boiled, crushed beans for earache (the Comanche tribe used it for ear sores and aches too) and the Cheyenne used them for eye lotions.