Jimson Weed

In 1676 Nathaniel Bacon, dissatisfied with government corruption and frustrated by its lack of support against hostile Indians, led a rebellion against the Governor of Virginia which culminated in the burning of Jamestown. The first batch of troops sent by Governor Berkeley to put down this uprising never arrived. Snacking en route on some roadside weeds, they became the victims of a famous case of mass poisoning.

The roadside weed which they ate was *Datura stramonium*. Known thereafter as “Jamestown weed,” now shortened to Jimson weed, it has many other common names, including thorn-apple, apple of Peru, stinkweed and tolguacha. It belongs to the family which contains perhaps the best known poisonous plants in the world, the Solanaceae, with deadly nightshade, bittersweet, tobacco, horse nettle and Jerusalem cherry. Besides its poisonous members, the family has two redeeming edible plants, the potato and the tomato.

Jimson weed is a big, tough, rank plant that grows up to five feet tall and flourishes in waste places, around abandoned buildings and along roadsides. The alternate leaves are ovate with irregular, acute lobes and toothed margins. Both leaves and stem may be dark, purplish-green. Each flower has a big, trumpet-shaped corolla up to four inches long, with five pointed lobes. The fruit is an oval, spiny capsule. In the fall it splits open along four regular valves to release numerous tiny, black seeds which are hallucinogenic. It is not uncommon to hear reports of people who have suffered severe symptoms, sometimes permanent blindness, after trying the seeds for these hallucinogenic effects.

Most parts of the plant are poisonous. Children have been affected by sucking the nectar from the base of the flowers and stock sometimes eat the foliage (although my cows seem to have the sense to leave it alone). The fruits and seeds continue to be a temptation for the careless.

The symptoms of this kind of poisoning are dramatic: a raging thirst, vision impairment, increased peripheral circulation and eventually, delirium. Dr. Page Booker, the pediatric consultant at the Poison Control Center in Charlottesville, still remembers how his pharmacology professor described *Datura* poisoning. Dr. Waddell told his University of Virginia medical students, “Three classic symptoms: dry as a chip, red as a turkey’s wattles and mad as a March hare!”

*Datura stramonium*, blooms in July, August and September, and the spiny seed pods are a familiar sight after all the leaves have fallen, since they stay on the old stems all winter long. The following spring, the plant will sprout again from the roots.

So the next time you stop to admire a stand of Jimson weed, a handsome plant despite its ugly properties, carry this historical speculation with you: if there were no Jimson weed in Virginia, how many seventeenth-century houses in Jamestown might still be standing?