

## The Darker Side of Angel's Trumpet

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**T**hings turned out pretty well for the settlers at the Plymouth colony. Every year we acknowledge, through our Thanksgiving celebration, the Pilgrim's agricultural successes. It's practically legend, the way they learned from friendly natives which indigenous plants could be gathered for food, and how to grow New World crops like maize, beans, and squash.

Then there was the ill-fated Jamestown settlement. Colonists there also had much to learn about the native flora — and they left behind a very different kind of legacy. What we remember today is mainly their misadventures with *Datura stramonium*, a shrubby, flowering plant that we know now as jimson weed (shortened from "Jamestown weed"). Reportedly, those who ingested the notorious weed "went mad" for several days, due to the hallucinogenic properties of the plant.



Jimson weed (Photo: MissouriPlants.com)

**Flash forward to the modern, gardening world** — and many of the ornamental plants we currently know as angel's trumpets belong in the *Datura* genus, and are closely related to the devilish jimson weed.

From its divine scent to its startlingly large, coronet-shaped blooms, angel's trumpet is an aptly named flower. A single plant can put on quite a show, easily reaching 10 feet in one growing season. Flowers tend to close during the hottest parts of the day and open in the evening. At twilight, fragrance is at its most intense, as the plants seek to seduce lunar moths and other nocturnal pollinators.



Angel's trumpet comes in many shapes and colors, including ruffly double forms not seen here.

Though tree-like in form, angel's trumpet is actually an herbaceous perennial in warm climates (zones 7-10), and it's grown as annual further north. Here in my Atlanta neighborhood, angel's trumpet is still blooming like crazy at Thanksgiving time, as we haven't had a frost yet.

### But let the gardener beware:

The Jamestown stories are more than myth. Today, *Datura's* effects on the central nervous system are well known. All parts of the plant are toxic, containing the alkaloids atropine, hyocyamine, and scopolamine. Ingesting the seeds can cause delirium and disorientation, even hallucinations that have sometimes resulted in harmfully reckless behavior.



Gardeners should also know that the plant's sap contains large amounts of atropine, the substance used by ophthalmologists to dilate the pupil during eye exams. There are numerous reports of people who have rubbed their eyes after working with angel's trumpet and have suffered from dilated pupils for days. Since you can also absorb the alkaloids through an abrasion, it's best to wear gloves and wash your hands frequently if you're cultivating angel's trumpet.

### Want to collect *Datura* seeds for next year's garden?

It's easy to harvest them from the pods — just be sure to label and store them safely. In 1983, according to a [CDC report](#), a couple lapsed into a coma just after phoning for an ambulance. Upon their awakening, this is what doctors learned: While making dinner, the wife had added a seasoning to the hamburger, but later realized it was *Datura* seeds she'd saved from her garden. She scraped most of the seeds off the meat and served the meal. Shortly thereafter, the couple began hallucinating and passed out. They were hospitalized for three days. ♡

