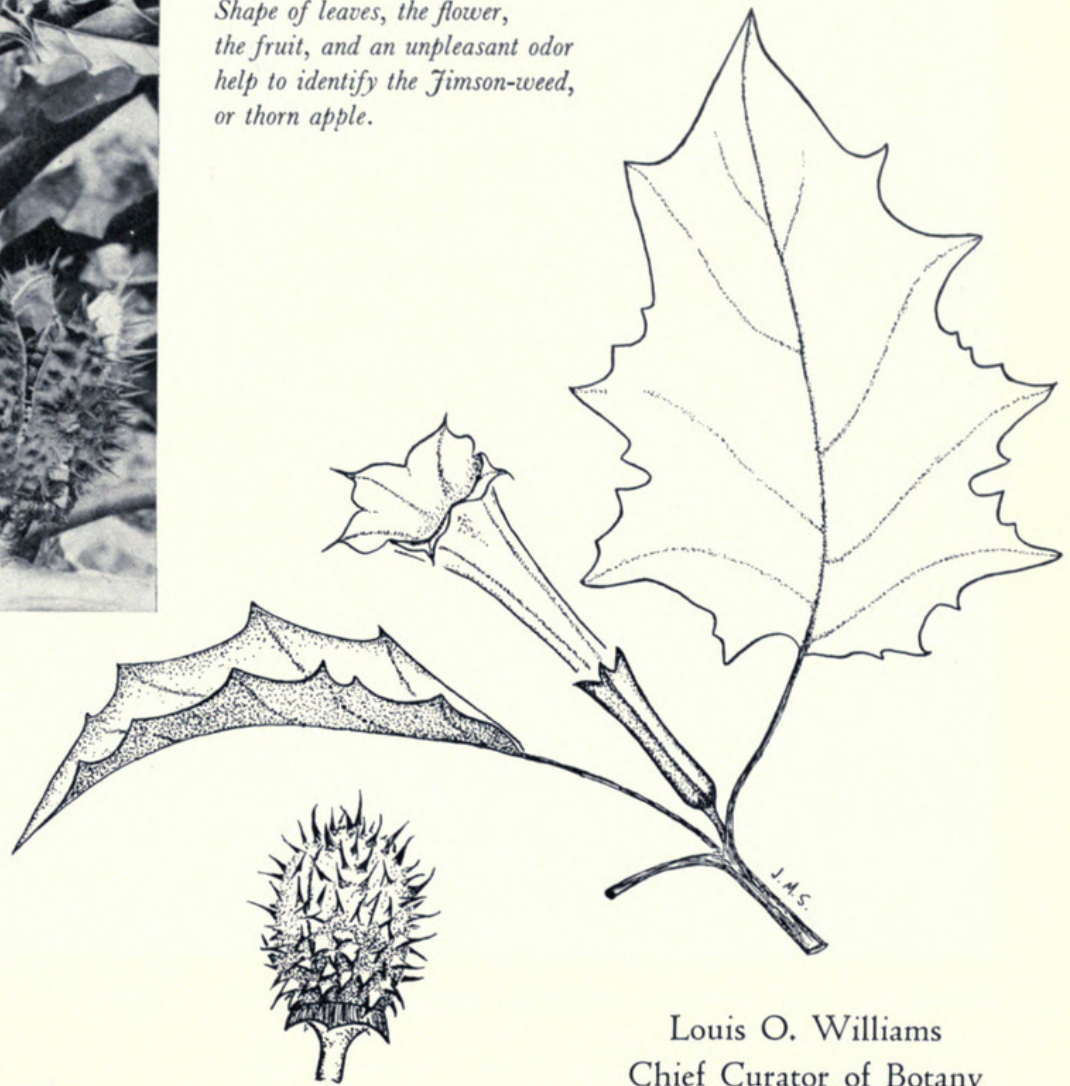




Shape of leaves, the flower, the fruit, and an unpleasant odor help to identify the Jimson-weed, or thorn apple.



Louis O. Williams
Chief Curator of Botany

THE FAMILY of plants to which the potato belongs is popularly called the potato, or nightshade, family. Botanists universally refer to the family as "the Solanaceae." This large and, to man, important group of plants contains members that produce such foods as potatoes, tomatoes, sweet and hot peppers, and eggplants. Tobacco is also an economically important member of the family; and several drugs come from the Solanaceae. An old and important drug is belladonna, used to relieve pain. Atropine, commonly used by oculists to dilate the pupil of the eye to facilitate examination, comes from the same plant. Several ornamentals are also found in the family: petunias, so conspicuous in annual plantings around Chicago, are an example.

Weeds are to be found in the potato family, too. Weeds have been defined as "plants out of place." One of these plants is the Jimson-weed, which is also called thorn apple, Jamestown-weed, apple-of-Peru, and stramonium. When the spiny fruits are conspicuous then perhaps the commonest name is "thorn apple." Stramonium is the name of the drug that comes from this plant; it is an alkaloid that is used much as is belladonna.

Vacant lots and cultivated fields around Chicago often contain plants of Jimson-weed, which is probably a native of America. Normally no one would pay much

attention to the plants if it were not that children sometimes pick the thorn apples and test them out to see if they are good to eat. All parts of the Jimson-weed are toxic but the seeds contain a greater amount of the toxic alkaloid than do other parts of the plant.

Every year the Museum receives frantic telephone calls about children who have eaten a plant and are sick. The plant described and the symptoms given often indicate that another child has experimented with thorn apples.

Symptoms that may be present in poisoning from Jimson-weed include: dilated pupils, delirium, thirst and dry mouth, lack of coordination, headache, nausea. If these symptoms, or part of

them, appear in a child and it is suspected that he has eaten from a wild plant, he should be taken to a doctor or a hospital immediately.

In any plant poisoning, specimens of the plant causing the distress should be taken to the hospital so that they may be accurately identified, for not all poisons are treated in the same way.

The spiny fruit (half as big as your thumb to the size of a small egg), leaf shape, and the disagreeable odor of the plant will all help in the identification of this weed. We suggest that you destroy Jimson-weeds around your property, or if there are too many, then show them to children and explain that they are not to be eaten. ■

THORN APPLES ARE NOT FOR EATING



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