

INDIAN LOVE STORY

By Barry Glick

They were the dog days of August on the reservation, and the young, voluptuous squaw had just sent her papooses off to practice bow hunting with the elders of the tribe. Consequently, she was looking forward to an intimate afternoon with Tonto, the chief's son and father of her two little ones. They zipped up the front of the teepee with bliss in their eyes, romance in their hearts and passion on their minds, when a distracting buzzing sound shattered the mood. It was those damn, pesky, annoying teepee flies again!!!

Now, the other day, whilst foraging for "Indian Turnips" (*Arisaema triphyllum*) aka "Jack In The Pulpits," Tonto had noticed that they'd accidentally dug up another bulb-like plant that no one in the tribe had ever seen before. He keenly observed a swarm of dead flies on one of the bulbs that had been accidentally crushed. Innovator that he was, he took some of the basswood honey that they'd retrieved from a hollow "Bee Tree" blown down by a recent thunderstorm and mixed it with the liquid from the crushed bulb, and in that moment, the first fly strip was born.

Folks, I wasn't there, so I can't say for sure if this is what really went down, but in my mind, that's how I like to imagine it happening.

In any event, the plant is *Amianthium muscitoxicum* (below), a member of the Lily Family, and the common name is "Fly Poison."



This is just one of the many native plants that the early inhabitants of our country used for sustenance and medicine before Kroger's and Walmart. I mentioned *Arisaema triphyllum* above, which most of us know and love as the "Jack In The Pulpit." I referred to it by another moniker, even older than "Jack In The Pulpit," "Indian Turnip." The latter common name speaks to the edible nature of the tubers that this plant grows from. *Arisaema triphyllum* just happens to be in the same family as Philodendron, Tapioca, and Dieffenbachia.

BTW, the common name for Dieffenbachia, a common house plant, is "Dumb Cane," the reason being that if you were to bite into the plant, the oxalic acid crystals would cause a painful swelling of the tongue and mouth rendering you unable to speak. Those same oxalic acid crystals are prevalent in the bulbs of the "Jack In The Pulpit." So how did the name "Indian Turnip," a term that would lead us to believe that there is an edible component to the plant, come to be?

Well...besides eating the leaves of the plant, and the seeds, the earliest Americans discovered that by roasting the bulbs, the oxalic acid was destroyed, making the "Turnips" very edible. I was always told that they soaked the bulbs in a cloth bag in the creek for several days and eventually the running water leached out the oxalic acid. I haven't been able to substantiate that method factually for this

plant, but I have authenticated it for “Acorn Flour” as soaking a bag of acorn pulp in the creek was the method used to make a crude baking flour from crushed Oak acorns as they needed to rid the pulp of the acrid tannic acid.

Another east coast native plant used by the Native Americans is *Gaultheria procumbens* aka “Wintergreen” or “Teaberry.” I’m sure you’ve encountered this low growing plant with dark green, glossy foliage and bright red berries. Native Americans brewed a tea from the leaves to relieve headache, fever, sore throats and the like. Little did they know that one of the constituents of the plant is salicylic acid, a metabolite of what is known in our modern times as Aspirin.

And speaking of ground hugging plants with glossy foliage and red berries, you’ve probably also stepped over/on *Mitchella repens*, aka “Partridge Berry,” a plant with two very small, very white flowers in the axils, you know the place where the leaf meets the stem, remember that term, we’re gonna have a quiz later. Well it just so happens that those flowers are extremely fragrant. Now don’t be lazy, get down on the ground and give them a sniff, it’s really worth it. Just so happens that in their final weeks of pregnancy, Native American women drank a tea from the leaves to ease childbirth. During nursing they made a lotion from the leaves to relieve breast soreness.

I don’t think there’s a person around that doesn’t know that “Jewel Weed” is an efficient remedy for “Poison Ivy” and other skin irritations. This plant is actually in the Genus *Impatiens* and is closely related to the “New Guinea *Impatiens*” that so many of us buy as annuals for spring and summer color on our porches, patios and in our gardens. Turns out that the Chippewa ate the seeds, they’re supposed to taste like Butternuts. I’m not sure how they caught them because the other common name for *Impatiens capensis*, the orange of the two species and *Impatiens pallida*, the yellow, is “Touch Me Not,” a term that refers to the explosive seed dispersal mechanism. Who among us hasn’t played around with the ripe seed heads as a child and as a pranking adult.

If you find this type of information as fascinating and as exciting as I do, perhaps you’re an amateur “Ethnobotanist” and didn’t know it. Ethnobotany is the scientific study of the traditional knowledge and customs of a people concerning plants and their medical, religious, and other uses.

Till our next horticultural excursion,

Peace out

Glickster

Oh, and by the way, here’s a little post script of botanical trivia for you. The reason that the scientific name for “Fly Poison” is *Amianthium muscitoxicum*, is that the Greek word Amiantos means unspotted plus Anthos means flower. Regarding the second word, the specific epithet, the scientific name for the genus that houseflies are included in, is *Musca*, plus toxicum is DUH, poison! It’s really quite simple, don’t you think?

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