



## “Musing from the Hill” by Susan Crossett

as seen on the *Dunkirk Observer* on Fridays  
and the *Jamestown Post-Journal* on Saturdays



### Not The Way I'd Recommend Doing One In

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Dear Readers, I'm certain most (if not all of us) have entertained larcenous, if not murderous, thoughts at one time or another. I grant that some may be valid indeed. BUT if you plan to commit murder, may I suggest you use something besides Bittersweet Nightshade?

Its Latin name *dulcamara* refers to the flavor of the berries, which are first bitter, then unpleasantly sweet. Bittersweet nightshade has been used to treat cancers, tumors, and warts since ancient times, actually as far back as Galen (AD 180). It also appears in “Culpeper's Complete Herbal” in 1681. Although the plant has long been recognized as being highly toxic it has been used as an external remedy for skin abrasions and inflammation. The stems were approved for external uses as supportive therapy in chronic eczema.



Yes, it grows around here and, yes, I find the flower quite attractive: one of my prints reminds me of a jester's costume: elongated yellow “nose” with a purple cape of five or six petals. The berries are green, turning to an inviting bright red.

Quoting The National Audubon Society Field Guide to Wildflowers: This vine, introduced from Europe, has distinctive leaves. The leaves and unripe fruit contain the poisonous alkaloid solanine. Although the plant is sometimes called

Deadly Nightshade, its toxin is not fatal; however, the berries are attractive to children and can cause poisoning if eaten in a large quantity. The species is called bittersweet because portions of the plant first taste bitter, then sweet. Long ago the plant was used in England to counteract witchcraft. (No details, regrettably, about how that occurred.)

In a paragraph on the Nightshade Family, Audubon wants us to know that there “are about 85 genera and 2,800 species, found in tropical and warm temperate regions, especially in South and Central America. Several are poisonous, but others supply food such as chiles and bell peppers, tomatoes, potatoes, eggplant and groundcherries (also known as husk tomatoes or tomatillos. (I did enjoy those the year I grew them.) Commercial tobacco is also in the family as are Painted Tongue, petunias, and butterfly flowers. This (Solanaceae) is also known as the potato family.

Peterson calls the bittersweet nightshade an alien, adding it's weak and vinelike. Note, this book continues, the five swept-back violet (sometimes white – mine aren't) petals and the protruding yellow beak formed by the anther. Leaves with 2 small lobes at base. Fruit, drooping clusters of egg-shaped berries, green turning to ruby-red. 2-8 ft. Moist thickets.

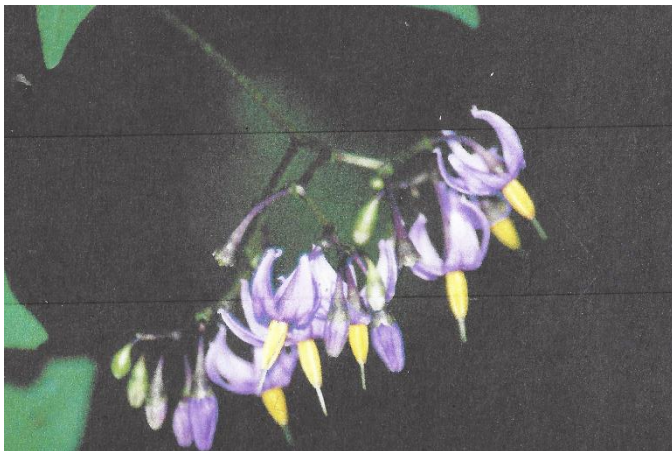


Newcomb calls the flowers “shooting star-shaped, ½” wide with the flower lobes pointing backwards. Flowers in small clusters along the stem. Leaves divided into 3 leaflets, or deeply lobed with a large terminal segment though they can also be entire. Fruit, a red berry, somewhat poisonous.

If, however, you are determined to proceed, may I tell you that both the ripe and immature fruits are toxic with a lethal dosage estimated to be 200 berries. (Pie anyone?) Such poisoning is often confused with bacterial gastroenteritis with symptoms not occurring until several hours after ingestion. (See, dear? I thought it a bad idea to eat at my mother's tonight. You know she's a dreadful cook. I'm sure you'll feel better in the morning.) Symptoms include circulatory and respiratory depression, convulsions, cyanosis, death, diarrhea, dilated pupils. (Hey! I don't know about you but I think we could probably quit after “death.”) Anyway, to continue with the symptoms: headache, paralysis, scratchy throat, shock, speech

difficulties, stomach ache, subnormal temperature, vertigo, and vomiting. Investigators found significant neurologic and pathologic GI toxicity when mice were fed unripened fruit, indicating that poisoning with this plant should be considered a critical situation. Fatal intoxication is more common in children.

Let's not poison anyone at this time but, if you have the chance, do check out the flower. It's quite unique.



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