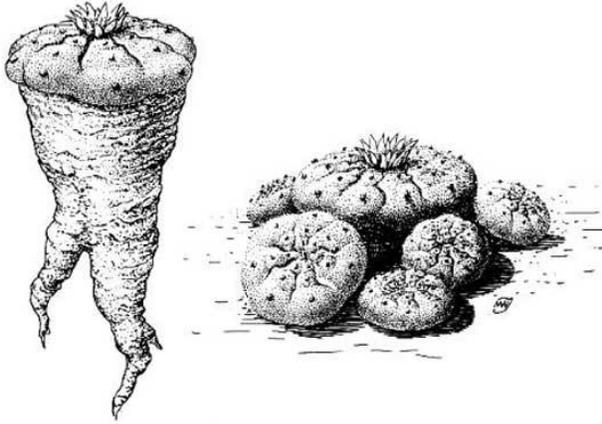


THE NAUGHTY CACTUS

By Sue Haffner



Peyote

Photograph from mcleane.harvard.edu

At various times in the past, at our plant sales, we've had kids—usually junior high aged boys—side up to the cashier and inquire, “Do you have ... peyote?” Snicker, snicker.

Well, no, we don't. We would get into serious trouble if we tried to sell plants of *Lophophora williamsii*. This plant is a Schedule I substance according to the U.S. Controlled Substances Act. California goes even farther, banning the entire genus: “Every person who plants, cultivates, harvests, dries or processes any plant of the genus *Lophophora*, also known as peyote, or any part thereof shall be punished by [a sentence in] county jail for one year, or the state prison.” (California Health and Safety Code, Chapter 6, Article 3, Section 11363).

What is it about this little cactus that has brought it such notoriety? Well, it's the well-known “dope cactus”, I suppose. You are supposed to eat a piece of it and get high. This all stems from the plant's use as a hallucinogen.

From the Aztecs and Toltecs to today's approximately 300,000 members of the Native American Church, indigenous peoples of North America have for centuries considered peyote sacred. It is their view that its ceremonial ingestion brings mystical connection with the Creator, who first gave it as a gift to help a lost, starving Indian woman find her way back to her tribe. In the 16th Century, Spanish missionary Bernardo Sagahun observed the Indians' ritual use of the plant, which he mistook for a fungus and dubbed the “sacred mushroom.”

How did the plant become illegal? This situation goes back to around the turn of the 20th Century. By then, most Native Americans had been removed to reservations and Christian missionaries waged aggressive campaigns to convert them. While they had some success, they were frustrated by the stubborn insistence of some of the reservation people to cling to their traditional practices, including the use of peyote. A prominent churchman who had some political influence lobbied members of Congress for several years in order to get the practice declared illegal. Despite the long tradition of restrained, ritual use of peyote by tribal people and statistics showing that drug addicts use street drugs and alcohol, not peyote, the use of it was outlawed. You can read the amazing story in “Peyote, the divine cactus” by Edward Anderson.

Peyotists and their defenders waged a long legal battle with the United States government to maintain the right to collect, transport, and ingest the cactus in religious ceremonies and finally achieved some modest success in the late 1960s. At that time, Native Americans in some states won their rights to use peyote for religious purposes.

The term peyote (a.k.a. devil's root, whiskey cactus, pellote, challote, mescal buttons, dumpling cactus, etc.) refers to several species of cactus, though the buttons (dried pieces) used ceremonially are cut from *Lophophora williamsii*. Experts dispute just how many species are in the genus, but recognized currently are *L. diffusa* and *L. fricii* as well as *williamsii*. *L. diffusa* is known only from one location near Vizarron, Queretaro, so is considered endangered. *L. fricii* is similarly known from a limited habitat.

Inhabitants of northwestern and central Mexico also identify *Strombocactus disciformis*, *Astrophytum asterias*, *Pelecypora aselliformis* and *Pelecypora strobiliformis* as "peyote". These plants also contain the powerful alkaloids and resinous bodies that produce altered states of consciousness. Mexican folk healers also testify to their medicinal properties.

So, can you really get high from *Lophophora*? Someone once described to me that the fresh cut plant is too astringent to eat, which is why the dried pieces are used. Eating a "button" can make you "puke and pass out"—which doesn't sound like fun to me. I recall seeing a documentary about present-day Native American Church practice wherein the buttons are used to make a beverage which is consumed ceremonially. The camera was not allowed to show the ceremony, but participants reported that the "tea" produced a calm state of mental and spiritual clarity.

Lophophora williamsii is a dull, bluish green in color and grows close to the ground in a globular shape (5--10 cm. high). It has a thick taproot about 10 cm. long, and 7--13 nearly vertical ribs. The plant is tubercled with a central flower (white, pink, or yellow) surrounded by a mass of long pink or white hair.

The flower is about 2.5 cm with a broad, funnel--form tube. The fruit (red with black seeds) is approximately 2 cm or less in length.

The botanical name is from Greek *lophos* = crest, and *phores* = to carry, meaning "crest--bearing" referring to the tufts of trichomes (hairs) on the tubercles. *L. williamsii* was first published in 1894 as an *Echinocactus*. In old, old texts you can see it referred to as *Anhalonium*. The Cactus and succulent journal carried an article awhile back about the peyoteros who are licensed to harvest peyote for use by the Native American Church. There are only three such persons currently doing this, permitted by the DEA and the Texas Department of Public Safety. The growing areas are currently over--harvested, saved mostly by their being fenced off on private property. The harvesters do not dig up the plants, but slice off the heads, leaving the taproots to regenerate new heads, which takes several years. There is some evidence that repeated beheading results in larger plants.