

Yard and Garden – 10-17-09- Ted Griess/ Extension Horticulture Assistant

When I am asked to identify a specimen — whether it be a plant or an insect — it is somewhat easy simply because I’ve usually encountered it before. On August 15, 2009, I wrote about a mysterious plant that I had difficulty identifying. It was a plant I had never seen. The plant turned out to be devil’s claw, but before I arrived at the answer, I had to do some serious research. Guess what? A similar situation happened this week.



A few days ago, a fellow gardener presented me with a strange, ominous-looking, pod-like structure for identification. The pod was about three inches long and one and one-half inches in diameter. The walls of the pod were thick and fleshy with a very attractive violet-blue color on the outside and a white color on the inside. It had split open and inside was what looked to be a large worm. When I touched the pod and its contents, both felt cold and clammy. Once again, I was baffled. The gentleman who handed it to me even commented, “It looks like an alien to me.” It was time to undergo more research.

I discovered the pod had been picked from a plant growing in his friend’s yard, and the friend had asked him its identity. He brought it to me.

With my camera in hand, the next day I visited the friend’s yard. There, randomly attached to a climbing leafy vine, were other pods, each containing the same strange structure. I was still confused. After visiting with the owner, taking a number of photos and picking a cluster of pods, I returned to my office.

I don’t claim to have all the answers, but the good news is, I usually know where to find them. I immediately sent out an email asking for help from the horticulture experts at UNL. With it, I attached photos of this peculiar specimen. Anxiously, I awaited their reply.

In the interim, I started conducting my own research. After checking a number of resources, I hit pay dirt, or so I thought. Immediately, I fired off another email to those same UNL experts indicating what I thought the plant to be. I was seeking their assurance that I was on the right track. They responded back confirming my discovery.



One might ask, “What could cause such a stir?”

The pod, with its strange-looking contents, was *Akebia quinata*, more commonly known as chocolate vine. The vine from which the pod came had been planted years ago by the previous property owners. During my research I discovered that *Akebia quinata* is rarely known to produce seed pods. That explains why the current owner had never noticed them before.

Chocolate vine's origin is Japan, China and/or Korea. In the U.S., it is hardy in Zones 4 through 8. Growing in Nebraska, it is deciduous; whereas, growing in the South, the plant is semi-evergreen. The vine needs a support on which to grow; otherwise it becomes a ground cover. It grows rampantly, reaching heights of twenty to thirty feet. Chocolate vine is known to be somewhat invasive in the southeastern United States.



The leaves are compound with five elliptical leaflets growing in a palmate pattern. The plant is often referred to as *Fiveleaf Akebia*. Clusters of small chocolate-purple flowers appear in early spring. The flowers emit a pleasant vanilla fragrance and under favorable conditions, a fertilized flower will give rise to three-inch long, violet-blue fruit pods. In the fall, when mature, the pods split open revealing their contents, which I described as worm-like. Interestingly, I read where others described it as resembling a sack of insect or amphibian eggs. This odd structure is actually a multitude of black seeds embedded in a sticky, whitish pulp. The pulp is said to be edible with a taste reminiscent of a mild melon or guava- flavored tapioca. I must admit, its odd appearance certainly doesn't make it appetizing.



Always knowing the answer is impossible, but knowing where to look or with whom to check is important. Furthermore, it's gratifying to know that once again I've learned the identity of another mysterious plant.