

Yard and Garden – 08-15-09 – Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

By Jove, I've solved the mystery. Although it's not Scotland Yard, quite often I feel like the Sherlock Holmes of Buffalo County Extension. I'm constantly asked by people to identify mysterious items. Whether their findings are plants, insects or other creatures, I welcome the challenge. After seven years as Buffalo County's Extension horticulturist, I've discovered that experience comes in handy. Many times what is a mystery to my client is something that I've seen and solved before. It's when I'm presented with a new challenge that I must put my sleuthing skills to work. Like most detectives, I look for the obvious clues. Occasionally, I call upon the experts from the horticulture department of the University of Nebraska.

Recently, Rita was asked by Louise Schwartz, her bridge buddy, if I'd stop by her home and help identify a mysterious plant growing in her flower border. She indicated that she had not personally planted this anomaly, and her concern was whether it was a flower or a weed.

When I arrived at the scene, I approached the flower bed with camera and ruler in hand. I was bewildered when I saw this oddity. In all my years I had never seen a plant like this. I was stumped. What plant was it? Was it a weed or was it a flower? I didn't know.

Odd as this mysterious plant appeared, I found it to be somewhat attractive. The base of the plant was coarse and thick, nearly two inches in diameter and covered with hairs. The plant sprawled in a prostrate manner mingling with the other flowers in the border as if it had been purposely planted. I knew such was not the case. From where did it come?



The main stem branched; attached to these branches were fuzzy, large, round, slightly lobed leaves somewhat similar in shape to those of squash. When I touched them, I noticed a sticky substance and a peculiar, slightly offensive smell. Attached near the upper ends of each branching stem were clusters of appealing pink flowers resembling in shape those of a catalpa tree's flowers. Each flower was approximately two inches in diameter.

Taking a closer look at the older flower clusters, I found my first strategic clue. In most blooming plants, when flowers are pollinated, a fruiting body usually develops. Clusters of hook-like seed pods had formed.

“Ah ha,” I thought. “I’ve seen these before — in a book.” With bits and pieces of evidence in hand, I returned to my office.

I immediately grabbed *Weeds of the Great Plains*, an outstanding reference book, published by the Nebraska Department of Agriculture. There it was. On pages 384 -385, I found color photos and a complete botanical description of *Proboscidea louisianica* — more commonly called devil’s claw and sometimes referred to as unicorn plant or ram’s horn.



I discovered this plant is native to Nebraska. Although it is listed as a weed, I did learn this annual plant is sometimes grown as an ornamental due to its interestingly shaped mature fruits and pink flowers. Furthermore, as ominous as its name sounds, the strange-looking fruits are not poisonous. The book indicated that tender young fruits were sometimes eaten by early settlers. At maturity, these hook-like fruits split at the end and form two horned claws — hence the name devil’s claw.

I excitedly rushed back to Louise’s home and reported its identity. By Jove, mystery solved..... or was it? I’m still not sure. Is it a weed or is it a flower? And who or what planted it in Louise’s flower garden? It’s too bad I can’t give Sherlock a call.