

Academy Garden Club Thymes

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMY GARDEN CLUB OF LENOX

October 2024

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Horticultural Column

Seed Pods

By Harriet Wetstone

Having had my eye caught by the gomphocarpus physocarpus in my neighbor's garden, I have been on a hunt for unusual seed pods. It is so incredible what one can find in a garden!!

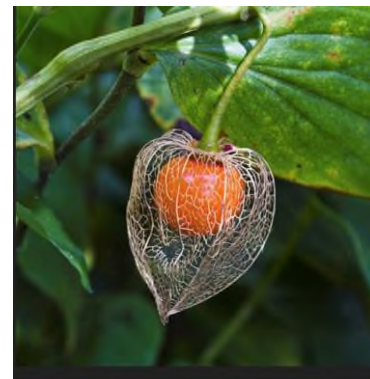


Gomphocarpus physocarpus????!, or the Hairy Ball plant or Family Jewels or Balloon Milkweed. What is that? It is a member of the family Apocynaceae. The Apocynaceae is a family of flowering plants of all different forms, trees, shrubs, herbs, etc., commonly known as the dogbane family, because many of the plants exude milky latex sap which is poisonous and, perish the thought, were used to poison dogs. Oleander, plumeria, periwinkle or vinca, and desert rose are some of the more familiar and less toxic members of this family.

The Balloon Milkweed is a five- or six-foot-tall vase shaped plant with slender sword shape leaves and delicate clusters of waxy white flowers which are nice, but not remarkable. But - towards late summer come these puffy chartreuse seed balls within which contain seeds which ripen into familiar milkweed fluff.

This is a plant loved by the monarch butterflies whose caterpillars devour the leaves while later the butterflies love the nectar rich waxy white flowers. Native to southern Africa, for us it is hardy only through zones 8-10. But it is a plant readily grown from seed. It is particularly useful to monarch butterflies because it is still blooming later in the season than some other milkweeds.

The Balloon Milkweed reminded me of the Chinese Lantern Plant or Physalis alkekengi, which also has wonderful puffy pods, and I thought they would be related, but not so. The Chinese Lantern is in the Solanaceae family. Many of the members of this family, which includes the nightshades, contain potent alkaloids and some are highly poisonous - belladonna is a good example. Other nightshades of course are very familiar foods - tomatoes, potatoes, eggplant, peppers, goji berries. The edibles most closely related to Chinese Lanterns are the ground cherries and tomatillos.



The lovely orange Chinese Lanterns have only insignificant fruits not worth eating, but they are so decorative. And perhaps the most magical part of the Chinese Lantern is that, if left to over the winter, the bright orange color fades away and by spring becomes the lantern of nothing but delicate skeletal networks of beige veins revealing the orange-red berries within.

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Chinese Lanterns are perennials hardy from zone 3 to 9, and they are easily started from seed. They should be sown directly into the ground or in containers in the spring after the danger of frost is passed. It helps to soak them in water before planting. They take two to three weeks to germinate. They can grow to 2 to 3 feet tall and spread about two feet in diameter. They prefer full sun and reasonably rich soil. As beautiful as they are, however, they can become invasive if not watched, so container-grown is a good idea.



The same is true for *Lunaria annua*, which is from the Brassicaceae family. This is the silver dollar plant, so known because of its luminous flat round seed pods. It seems surprising that it is related to broccoli and Brussel sprouts, but it is! *Lunaria* is a biennial flowering plant that can grow 24 to 36 inches tall. The first year it is a foliage plant of heart shaped leaves, but the second year it has fragrant lavender flowers that are great for bees and butterflies and the wonderful silvery seed pods or sickles. The whole plant needs to be cut into bunches and hung upside to dry as the pods have husks that need to fall off to reveal the silver. *Lunaria* is easily grown from seed and does well as a woodland edge plant, needing little to no tending, except to watch that it doesn't become invasive.



And one more easily grown from seed plant which has beautiful and unusual seed pods is *Nigella* (*N. damascena*). *Nigella* is a genus of 18 species of annual plants in the family Ranunculaceae. *Nigella*, or “love in a mist”, has lovely fennel like foliage that forms a mist around the flowers. *Nigella* is best known for vivid blue flowers, but other cultivars are purple, pink and white. It grows to nearly two feet tall and can bloom for several weeks, although it probably wouldn't last a whole summer. It does, however self-sow, so you might have flowers through the fall. *Nigella* is toxic, but its black seeds are used as a flavorful spice and are packed with antioxidants. The seeds are held in unusually striped and spiny seed pods that look wonderful in bouquets.

Thanks to: Wikipedia; the spruce.com; www.epicgardening.com; <https://livetoplant.com>; www.gardeningknowhow.com. and more!