

The Weekly Plant

15 August 2016

Common names: silverleaf nightshade, white horsenettle, tomato weed, prairie berry, trompillo, satanbos (Afrikaans for “Satan’s bush”)

Scientific name: *Solanum elaeagnifolium*¹

In our Community: lot 88, northwest corner of the lot, by the road

Discussion

This Week’s Plant has an unusual distinction: it is featured on the Flora of Qatar website. Yes, that Qatar, the one near Saudi Arabia.

Though silverleaf nightshade is a mild-mannered plant here in the Village, it is a world traveller, unwelcome in every country it visits. Put it in a disturbed area (think farm field) in a dry climate and it will grow enthusiastically (take a look at the photos on the Qatar [website](#)). It is poisonous to horses, sheep, and sometimes cattle. Especially in Australia and Africa it is known to reduce crop yield, sometime severely, by competing for water and nutrients. So noxious is this weed that South Africa and Australia are trying biological control, importing insects from the southwest US hoping they will feed on and control this nightshade.

In the US silverleaf nightshade is on the noxious weed list of seven states (AR, CA, HI, ID, NV, OR, WA+PR, but not Arizona). It is most likely to grow in cultivated lands, orchards, rail-and roadsides, and waste places. Here in the Village, I’ve seen it in only three places - lot 88, new this year; a small patch on south Galileo; and a slightly larger patch on Langtry near Rainwater. Though holding its own, it is not spreading everywhere as it seems to in cultivated areas. That’s good, because it is devilishly hard to kill. Just a small piece of root or rhizome can create a new plant and chemical herbicides work only poorly, hence the biological warfare described above.



For several years I’ve looked forward to monsoon and finding silverleaf nightshade, a native of southwest US and northwest Mexico. The flowers are large and purple, shaped like those of its relatives, tomato and eggplant. They usually appear with monsoon rains - without them you may not notice the plant at all. At only 18 inches or so, it can easily hide in the grass. The leaves are silvery white. Take a close look and you’ll see



narrow prickles on the stem and sometimes on the leaves.

Though certainly a pest in the right (wrong?) circumstances, silverleaf nightshade is a useful plant. Yes, it is potentially poisonous, but the native peoples used it medicinally and to make cheese and tan leather. It is high in the alkaloid solasodine, a chemical used in contraceptive drugs with potential as a molluscicide and nematocide and as a cancer-treating drug.

¹ [Tropicos](#) is source for accepted scientific name.

Left: leaves are long and narrow, silvery white with wavy edges. Note the prickles on the leaf and stem.

Right: flower is about 1.5” wide, with 5 lobes. Color ranges from dark purple to white. The 5 yellow stamens are showy also. The fruit is about 0.5” wide, initially green with stripes, eventually turning yellowish, then black.

