



YELLOW POISON

By Eleanor Dietrich

The Yellow Jessamine is one of spring's earliest, showiest, and loveliest wild flowers. When you are driving down the highway or back roads, it is easy to spot as it searches for sun and support along fence rows and small trees. When you walk along a woodland path, you may see its inch-long trumpet-shaped blossoms sprinkled on the ground. Look up and see if you can find the flowers among the tree tops; it needs sun to bloom.

Yellow Jessamine is native to the Southern states and may be found from Virginia south to Florida and west to eastern Texas and Arkansas. Because it is common and showy, that may account for it having a variety of common names, such as Poor Man's Rope, Evening Trumpet Flower, Woodbine, Cow Itch, and Carolina Jasmine. It is the state flower of South Carolina. Yellow Jessamine is a member of the Logania family (*Loganiaceae*) which has 29 genera and 600 species of herbs, shrubs, climbers, and trees, most of which may be found in warmer climates. The Butterfly Bush (*Buddleia*), which many of us plant in our gardens, is also in this family.

In addition to their common names, wild flowers have standard and unique scientific names that are used by botanists the world over to communicate about specific types of plants. A particular plant will have two parts to its scientific name, the genus and the species. There are usually a number of different plants in a particular genus, but only one kind of plant will have the same genus and species name. In the case of the Yellow Jessamine, we have two different species in our area. The more common species is *Gelsemium sempervirens*. The genus name *Gelsemium* is derived from Gelsemino, the Italian name for Jasmine. The species name, *sempervirens*, means ever-living and denotes the evergreen leaves of the plant. This species is widespread, grows in drier habitats, and has a delicate fragrance. The second species, *Gelsemium rankinii*, grows in a smaller geographic range, from Leon County to southern Alabama. It is also distinguished by its preference for wet areas and the lack of aroma in its flowers. (If you must know, there are other distinguishing characteristics, such as apically rounded or acuminate sepals and winged or unwinged seeds, but the ones listed above work for me.)

Yellow Jessamine is a woody vine with evergreen lance-shaped leaves about one and a half inches long. The vine is slender and winds modestly around its host to mat at the top, or grows in tangles along the open ground. It can bloom as early as January in warmer winters, but is always one of the first bloomers of the spring. Its beauty and hardiness make it a favorite for gardens. You may often see it twining around and over a mailbox. There has even been a double-flowered form cultivated, called "Pride of Augusta," but the native form is very attractive. The evergreen leaves make a nice ground cover or trellis growth. It is easy to grow, and is not invasive. Like most native plants, it is better to buy from a nursery than to dig from the woods. Plants growing in a particular habitat generally do not transplant well since they will need all of their soil, water, and light conditions replicated in order to grow well. You will not have any difficulty finding this plant at a local nursery.

If you decide to pay special attention to this plant, perhaps even plant it in your yard, beware! The Logania family contains many poisonous plants including the one from which strychnine is obtained. All parts of the Yellow Jessamine contain toxic alkaloids that can cause paralysis and death. No part of this plant should be taken internally. It can also cause contact dermatitis, hence the Cow Itch name. Despite its deadly properties, it was once used as a medicine. One physician made a gelsemium remedy that he called "Electrical febrifuge." However, it is no longer recommended for medicinal purposes since even a small dose can be fatal. So let your knowledge be your guide, and enjoy this flower, but handle with care!