

# Ted Kaczynski's Letter Exchange with a Botanist on Wild Edible Plants

July 6-23, 1984

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## Ted to Sherman - 7/6/84

T. J. Kaczynski  
Stemple Pass Road  
Lincoln, Montana 59639  
July 23, 1984

Professor Sherman J. Preece  
Department of Botany  
University of Montana  
Missoula, Montana 59812

Dear Professor Preece:

I have a question concerning the buffalo gourd, *Cucurbita foetidissima*. Perhaps some member of your department would be willing to answer it for me.

According to Donald R. Kirk, *Wild Edible Plants of the Western United States* (Naturegraph Publishers, Healdsburg, California, 1970), page 271, the cooked fruit and seeds of the buffalo gourd are edible. Nothing is said about the edibility of the root.

My brother spends part of the year in western Texas, and he says that one of the local residents told him that the root of the buffalo gourd is edible. He also says that he cooked and ate some of the fruit of the plant and that it gave him a bad case of diarrhea. He says he was quite confident that he had identified the plant correctly. My brother does not have much experience in identifying wild plants, but on the other hand he is an intelligent man, so it is probable, but not certain, that his identification was correct. My own experience in using Kirk's book would seem to indicate that he takes a rather broad view of what constitutes edibility.

I would like to ask:

1. Is the root of the buffalo gourd edible?
2. If so, is any special method, of preparation needed to make it fit to eat?
3. Is there any special method of preparation that would remove the apparent cathartic properties of the fruit of the buffalo gourd?

Thank you for your help.

Sincerely yours,

T. J. Kaczynski

## Sherman to Ted - 7/18/84

University  
of Montana  
Missoula, Montana 59812  
Department of Botany (406) 243-5222  
18 July 1984

T. J. Kaczynski  
Stemple Pass Road  
Lincoln, Montana 59639

Dear Mr. Kaczynski:

I can't be of much help to you on the *Cucurbita* problem since personal knowledge is lacking in regard to *C. foetidissima* on my part and none of my references consider the edibility of the roots. The following information may be slightly relevant to some questions. Lewis and Lewis in their 1977 Medical Botany indicate that cucurbitacins are known to occur widely in the Cucurbitaceae and most cucurbitacins are known to be purgative. Arthur Cronquist in his 1981 An Integrated System of Classification of Flowering Plants explains that alkaloids are frequently produced in the Cucurbitaceae which contains bitter purgative cucurbitacins.

Repeated boiling through several changes of water may remove some of these materials but the plant would have to be particularly enticing for me to go to such trouble and still run a risk of toxicity. And, of course, individuals vary in their sensitivity to many chemicals.

Sorry I can't give you more definite answers.

Sincerely,

[signed]

Sherman J. Preece  
Professor of Botany

SP/hc

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## Ted to Sherman - 7/23/84

T. J. Kaczynski  
Stemple Pass Road  
Lincoln, Montana 59639  
July 23, 1984

Professor Sherman J. Preece  
Department of Botany  
University of Montana  
Missoula, Montana 59812

Dear Professor Preece:

Thank you very much for your courteous reply to my inquiry concerning the buffalo gourd, *Cucurbits foetidissima*. Actually your letter was quite helpful. Though it did not definitely answer the question of edibility, it did give enough information to indicate that the plant is probably not worth experimenting with.

Kirk (author of the book that recommended the fruit of *C foetidissima*) presumably relied on some report that the gourd was eaten by Indians; but the Indians may have eaten it only when "hard up" or they may have had some elaborate process for making it edible, as with certain other plants. Also, it is interesting to speculate that primitive peoples who eat certain fibrous, purgative, or otherwise objectionable plants from early childhood may become to some extent acclimated, so that their digestive systems are able to handle what would give a nasty upset to a civilized man.

Be that as it may, thanks again for your help.

Sincerely yours,

[signed]

T. J. Kaczynski

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