



# MONTEREY NEWS

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## Jewelweed Along the Roadsides, and Elsewhere

Jewelweed is a wild plant in the genus *impatiens*. If the name sounds familiar, maybe it is because this wild character has been domesticated, in the 1960s, and hybridized into a version less gangly and more marketable. Now *impatiens* is a household name and is advertised as “a popular bedding plant.” You can buy it and take it home to brighten up the garden with a variety of colors.

You can also stroll down the road, or look in your compost bin, or even in your vegetable garden which may be a little weedy. There you can see the wild original: jewelweed. It has more than thirty different common names, according to my old family books, and most of them tell something about the plant, also about the folks naming the plants. Some names leave a little to your mind’s imagination.

For instance, why name a fragile, leggy succulent plant that never caused a speck of trouble “kicking-colt”? I can understand some of its other action names, because once it has formed its seedpods, it is active. It is spring-loaded.

The seedpods have five long slim panels, held together at their seams under tension. If you brush against one, it makes a snapping sound, as it bursts along the seams, and out pop the seeds, flicked some distance from the mother plant. This is wild, kind of like a kicking colt, maybe. It is also true that even if you do not touch the pods, they reach the point at which they spontaneously pop open and fling the seeds out. If you are anywhere near this when it happens, you can hear them. Once I was on hand at just the right moment. It was a clear sunny day, but suddenly it sounded as if there were a sprinkle of rain pitter-pattering near me. No, it was the jewelweeds, the touch-me-nots, the snapweeds, audibly and spontaneously leaping into seed-dispersal action.



Another of its action names is jack-jump-up-and-kiss-me. Erasmus Darwin, poet, physician, and great uncle of the naturalist Charles Darwin, wrote this about the seed dispersal moment of the touch-me-not *impatiens*:

*With fierce distracted eye Impatiens stands  
Swells her pale cheeks and brandishes her hands,  
with rage and hate the astonished groves alarms  
and hurls her infants from her frantic arms.*

Another early British writer, John Josselyn, visited these parts in the seventeenth century and wrote two books about the wonders here. He called jewelweed the humming-bird tree and wrote this: “The Indians make use of it for aches, being bruised between two stones and laid to cold. But made into an unguent with hog’s grease, there is not a more sovereign remedy for aches upon stroaks.”

Others report the juice of the plant removes warts, so one of its names is wartwort. Even nowadays it is commonly felt to be useful in curing poison-ivy rash. Some say that providentially it often grows near poison ivy. You pick the succulent, juicy jewelweed and crush it a bit, then rub it on the rash.

Speaking of how succulent it is, this is a very juicy plant. Thoreau, who collected all sorts of botanical specimens and carried them home in his hat, found that jewelweed was one species that would not survive this, would wilt inside the hat and not be revived once put in a jar of water. In fact, jewelweed will wilt right where it is growing in a period of drought. But then if there is some rain it springs back upright again, good as ever.

Thoreau’s hat was his botany box. He built shelves inside it and observed that the plants were protected in there and almost all were safe from drying out.

We have two kinds of wild jewelweed in these parts. The more familiar one is ‘spotted jewelweed’, whose blossoms are orange with little red spots inside. The other one is yellow and one of my books calls it “pale touch-me-not” or *Impatiens pallida*. Its foliage is paler green.

Both are profuse right now along New Marlborough Road. If you walk down from the intersection with route 23, you’ll see orange on the right, yellow on the left. The ones on the left are particularly tall. Hummingbirds and bumblebees are foraging for nectar and spreading pollen from one individual to another. Seedpods are forming, once the blossoms drop away, and though they are still green, they are there to see now, with their five slim panels. One of these days, they will pop.

Can we eat these plants? Maybe so, but most accounts call them medicinal. They are considered anti-inflammatory and anti-fungal. I leave them for the hummingbirds and bumblebees. — Bonner McAllester