

As Potent as a Charm

BOTANICAL
bad seeds
black sheep
& skeletons
in the closet



a print series by Joan Colbert

The ongoing series, *As Potent as a Charm*, explores the malevolent side of familiar plants in a collection of black and white linoleum block prints. Although the concept is botanical, allusions to dark tales and malfeasance hint at a narrative within each visual representation.

Black Hellebore
Christmas Rose, *Helleborus niger*



The series title, *As Potent as a Charm*, is a phrase taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne's story, **Rappaccini's Daughter**. The title character, Beatrice, tends her father's botanical collection of lovely, yet lethal plants. While 'as potent as a charm' refers to the specimens, it could just as well describe Beatrice who, as the story progresses, becomes just as lovely and lethal as the flowers she nurtures.

"Night was already closing in; oppressive exhalations seemed to proceed from the plants and steal upward past the open window . . ."
Rappaccini's Daughter, Nathaniel Hawthorn

The Night Wolf
Women's Bane, *Aconitum*



Hot as a Hare
Blind as a Bat
Dry as a Bone
Red as a Beet
Mad as a Hatter

There's a bit of whimsy in this mnemonic of the symptoms that, in combination, could indicate an atropine overdose – possibly the effects of ingesting poisonous members of the nightshade family, Solanaceae, which includes Jimsonweed, Henbane, Belladonna and Mandrake. While there is little that is whimsical about poisoning, there is definitely plenty of drama and mystery in horticultural mishaps and misdeeds. Lovely plants may be leading double lives; happy blooms and tasty vegetables have cousins that are downright deadly. Herbalists differ on the merits and dangers of various herbs. The fascinating stories from botanical history, folklore and science invite and inspire imagery.



Hot as a Hare
Hemlock, *Conium maculatum*



Blind as a Bat
Bloodroot, *Sanguinaria canadensis*



Dry as a Bone
Fiddleneck, *Amsinckia menzies*



Red as a Beet
Mandrake, *Mandragora officinarum*





Mad as a Hatter
Jimson Weed, *Datura stramonium*





Aconitum

The five prints based on plants of the genus, *Aconitum*, are the only ones in the series that do not depict any actual plants. There are over 250 species of *Aconitum*, known as “the queen of poisons,” with common names for individual varieties derived from mythology, literature and appearance. The English name, Monkshood, describes the signature hood-like shape of the flower. Other names refer to its lethal qualities, including women’s bane, wolfsbane and mousebane. While humans and wolves require contact to succumb to the power of *Aconitum*, the smell alone is enough to kill a mouse.



Beyond
Blue Rocket and Devil's Helmet, *Aconitum napellus*



Monk(s)hood
Monkshood, *Aconitum napellus*



Insomnia
Wolfsbane, *Aconitum lycoctonum*



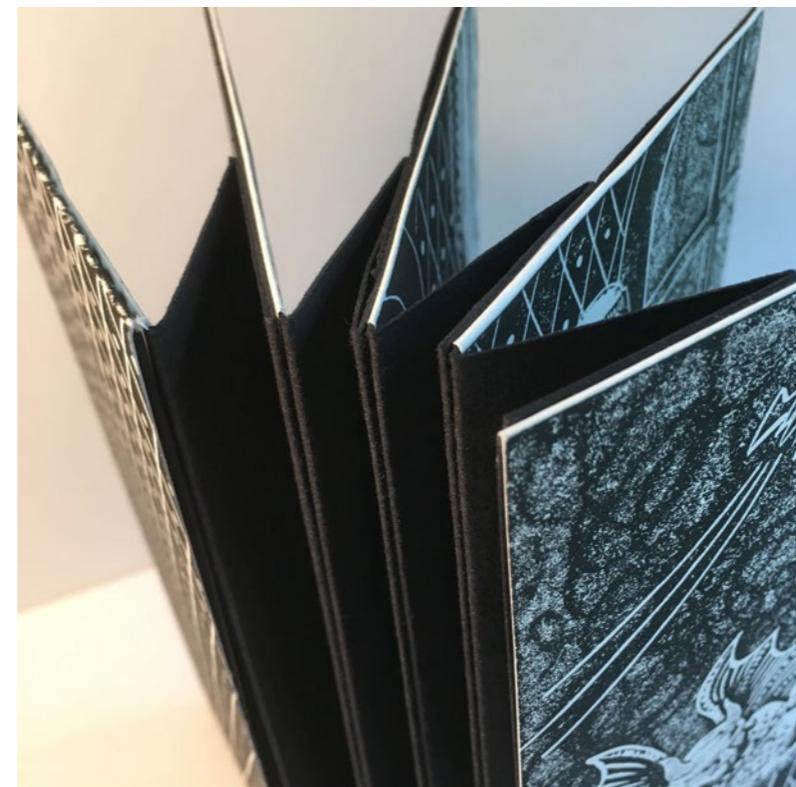
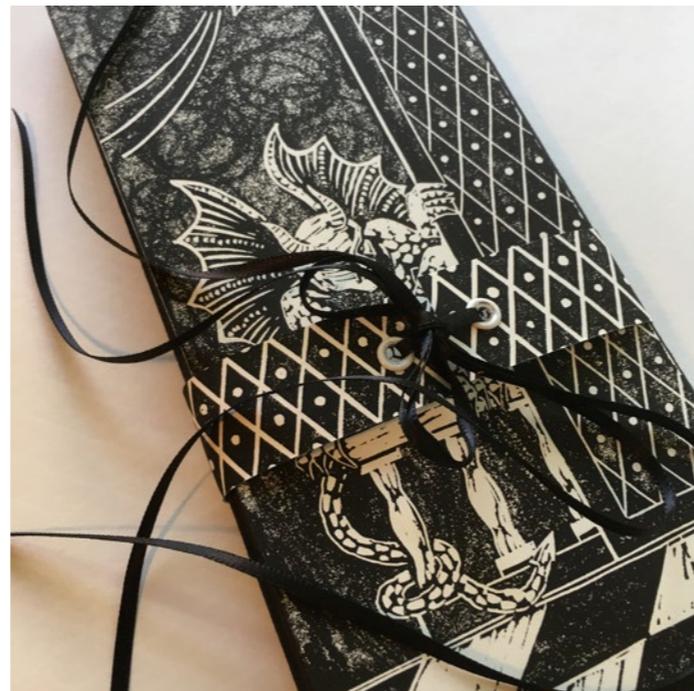
The Night Wolf
Women's Bane, *Aconitum*





Leopard's Bane
Leopard's Bane, Mousebane, *Aconitum*

a.k.a. Aconitum
handmade accordion book



Angel's Trumpet

This is yet another lovely, yet lethal, flower from the Solanaceae family. John Robertson, in his summary on **The Poison Garden** website says it best:

“In northern climates this attractive plant is often grown indoors because people assume its common name refers to the look of the flowers rather than the indication that this is the sound to be heard after ingestion of a fatal amount.”

Angel's Trumpet
Brugmansia suaveoleons



Perilous Plantings – Landscape

There have been many surprises in the ongoing research on poisonous plants for the *As Potent as a Charm* series. Not the least is the number of common landscape/foundation plantings that add a hint of danger to the structure of the garden, such as the following threesome of familiar shrubs.

Be Still
Oleander, *Nerium oleander*



Appearances deceive: the ubiquitous landscape/foundation plant of suburbia, the Yew, seems ordinary, but all parts of *Taxus baccata* are poisonous.

Pleasant Valley
Yew, *Taxus baccata*



A Deceptive Welcome
Rhododendron, *Rhododendron*



a riddle

I lived my life between the worlds
Neither earth nor sky would call me child
The birds were my companions
The wind and rain my mentors
Daily I grew in power and strength
'Til snatched out of time by the trickster
answer: mistletoe

Biding Time
Mistletoe, *Viscum album*



Black sheep and skeletons in the closet . . .
even the plant world has its share of family secrets,
eccentrics and deviants.

Consider the **family Solanaceae**, commonly referred to as either the nightshade or potato family: members of this unwieldy clan run the gamut from the meek to the murderous. In each of the following six Solanaceae prints the virtuous shares space with the disreputable.

Look for mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*) and the potato (*Solanum tuberosa*), deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*) and *Petunia*, henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*) and eggplant (*Solanum melongena*), bittersweet (*Solanum dulcamara*) and tomato (*Solanum lycopersicum*), along with tobacco (*Nicotiana*) and chili pepper (*Capsicum*).

With about 2,690 additional species, the history of the Solanaceae family's interaction with humans is one of dramatic trial and error, malevolence and goodwill.



Loves Me Not

Deadly Nightshade, *Atropa belladonna*
Petunia



Deceitful Charm

Jimson Weed, *Datura stramonium*
Chinese Lantern, *Physalis alkekengi*



Bittersweet

Woody Nightshade, *Solanum dulcamara*
Tomato, *Solanum lycopersicum*



Scuttle

Mandrake, *Mandragora officinarum*
Potato, *Solanum tuberosa*



Smokin' Hot

Tobacco, *Nicotiana tabacum*
Chili Pepper, *Capsicum*



Best Laid Plans

Henbane, *Hyoscyamus niger*
Eggplant, *Solanum melongena*

Foxglove

“The operation of this herb, internally taken, is often violent, even in small doses: it is best therefore not to meddle with it, lest the cure should end in the churchyard.”

Nicholas Culpeper (1616 – 1654)

Foxglove
Digitalis purpurea



*“thy fibres net the dreamless head,
thy roots are wrapt about the bones”*

Yew by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

The yew, *Taxus baccata*, may seem overly familiar as a foundation shrub, but it has long been known as the graveyard tree. Buried beneath the yew, the dead cannot pass through the spreading, shallow net of roots to return to the world. A tree of great longevity, living hundreds of years (and by some accounts, thousands), the yew is significant for its age, growth habits and presence in history, religion and folklore. All parts are toxic.

Silence
Yew, *Taxus baccata*



In late autumn the bare, zig-zag branches of the Black Locust, *Robinia pseudoacacia*, are the perfect counterpoint to the evening passage of crows headed to their nightly roost.

Although the seeds, bark and leaves of this locust contain several toxic components, the risk of poisoning is mainly confined to grazing livestock. Humans are more likely to have non-poisonous, but painful, interactions with the formidable thorns.

Gathering Dusk
Black Locust, *Robinia pseudoacacia*



The Elder, *Sambucus nigra*, long a tree of myth and magic, is also known for its malevolence. As the tree of Ruis, it joins the raven and the dandelion in marking the end of the year, a time of transformation and change, in the Celtic tree calendar. Elder trees may be inhabited by the Elder Mother (be sure to request her permission before cutting) or by witches. Wood can be used for magic wands, but never for cradles or kindling (burning will very likely 'raise the devil').

Ruis/The Elder Tree
Sambucus nigra





drawings for **Ruis**/The Elder Tree
Sambucus nigra

All parts of the elder tree are poisonous, yet Mrs. M. Grieve, in *A Modern Herbal* (1931) devotes nearly a dozen pages to its use in cosmetics, medicinals and edibles dating back to Roman naturalist, Pliny. Care must be taken to use only fully ripened, then cooked, berries in pies, jellies, wines or that gooseberry and elderflower syllabub you've been meaning to try!

Crush the leaves of Cherry (English) Laurel and they release a scent of almonds, which, most murder mystery fans know, is the tell-tale indication of cyanide. In fact, combined with water, it's hydrogen cyanide, or Prussic Acid, so it's probably best to pass on the cherry-laurel water, too.

The whip-poor-will was included with the Laurel because it's a night bird, but a conversation with colleague revealed just how appropriate it is. Whether considered a thief of souls or simply an evil omen, the whip-poor-will seems destined for bad news. Even James Thurber, known for his wit and humor, opens his short story, **The Whip-poor-will**, with "*The night had just begun to get pale around the edges when the whip-poor-will began.*" It does not end well.

The Pale Edge of Night
Cherry Laurel, *Prunus laurocerasus*





Cherry laurel water as a brandy mixer was in vogue a couple centuries ago, but subsequent fatalities lessened its popularity at the pub (although perps still appreciated it as a source of hydrocyanic acid/prussic acid).

Prunus laurocerasus, Cherry (or English) Laurel is one of several prints featuring trees with a sinister side. Pity the moth - caught between the whip-poor-will and the cyanogenic laurel leaves.

drawings for **The Pale Edge of Night**
Cherry Laurel, *Prunus laurocerasus*



Suspects is inspired by Castor Bean, *Ricinus communis*, a plant whose seeds contain neurotoxins that are 500 times more poisonous than cyanide, with a nod to the 1978 'umbrella murder' of Bulgarian dissident, Georgi Markov, in London. The narrative involves an umbrella tipped with a pellet of ricin and an assassin, code name Piccadilly. Although never completely resolved, the umbrella murder remains an intriguing tale from the cold war years.

Suspects
Castor Bean, *Ricinus communis*



Suspects/Piccadilly
Castor Bean, *Ricinus communis*



Suspects/Seeds
Castor Bean, *Ricinus communis*

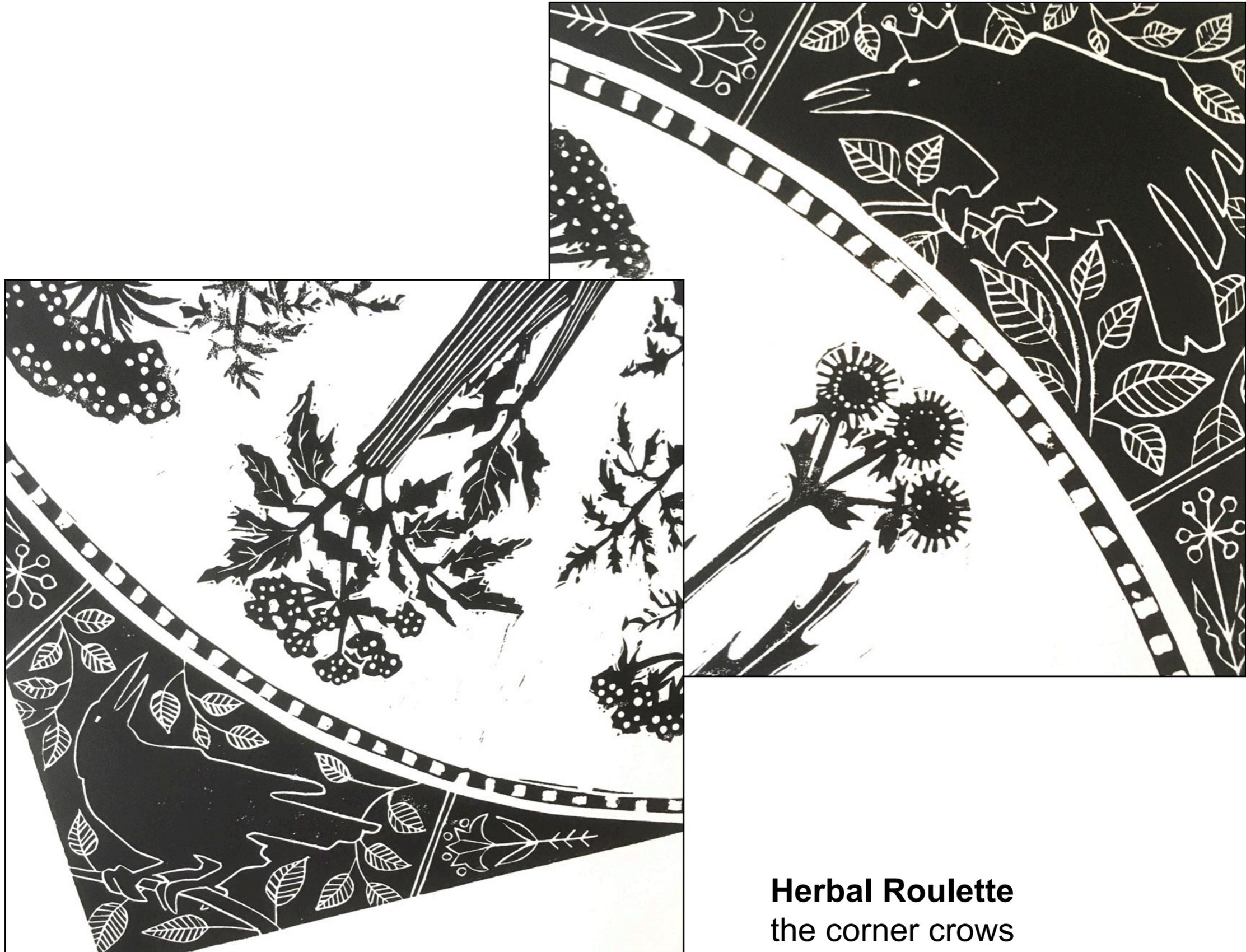


Suspects/Message
Castor Bean, *Ricinus communis*



Herbal Roulette

four sections of linoleum blocks
(awaiting the corner carvings)



Herbal Roulette
the corner crows



Herbal Roulette
planning the print



Herbal Roulette

“Amateurs fooling with plants in the parsley family are playing herbal roulette.”

Steven Foster and James A. Duke, **A Field Guide to Medicinal Plants**



Herbal Roulette Plant ID

from top, clockwise beginning at Socrates' goblet:

- Hemlock** *Conium maculatum* ●
- Rattlesnake Master** *Eryngium yuccifolium*
- Parsley** *Petroselinum crispum*
- Water Hemlock** *Cicuta maculata* ●
- Coriander, Cilantro** *Coriandrum sativum*
- Black Sanicle, Snakeroot** *Sanicula marilandica*
- Fool's Parsley** *Aethusa cynapium* ●
- Celery** *Apium graveolens*
- Carrot** *Daucus carota*
- Cow Parsnip** *Heracleum lanatum* ●
- Queen Anne's Lace** *Daucus carota*
- Angelica** *Angelica atropurpurea*

● poisonous

*“Poison is the meanest of killings,
the steel he could respect.”*

Brother Cadfael
in **Monk’s Hood** by Ellis Peters

“I prefer to poison them.”

Agatha Christie

*“Now,
a clever man would put the poison
into his own goblet, because he
would know that only a great fool
would reach for what he was given.”*

Vizzini, in **The Princess Bride**

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