

September 3, 2009

Dear David,

Your Chinese lanterns are, botanically speaking, *Physalis alkekengi*. The genus name comes from Ancient Greek physa, a bladder, and the species name – sometimes “alkengi” – is from the Arabic word for bladder cherry. Within the genus there are two edible species, *P. peruviana* and *P. prunosa* (possibly the same, or varieties of the same) that are used for food, best known as a principal ingredient for salsa, but also as “ground cherries” in the Deep South, where they are made into delicious pies. However, Chinese lanterns are mildly toxic, and are believed in herbal medicine to induce desired miscarriages. In susceptible people, contact with the leaves can cause mild skin irritation. The genus is a member of *Solanaceae*, which of course also includes peppers, eggplants, tomatoes and potatoes, all of which are known to contain toxins and skin irritants in their green parts.

Physalis alkekengi is a hardy, herbaceous perennial, which spreads vigorously by rhizomes. It has no diseases worth noting, and it can compete successfully with weeds and even with rough grass. In well-cultivated gardens, it may become invasive. The flower, a small, down-hanging bell, is worth noting in a simple way, but the inflated papery covering of the seed is a vivid orange and very showy. They are treasured by florists and flower arrangers, since, when stems are harvested at peak color, they may be hung upside down in a dry place, and they retain both their color and their form. They are therefore ideal for early winter arrangements with dried grasses.

The geographic range of *Physalis alkekengi* is unusual, stretching from Southern Europe to Japan, though it is possible that the ornamental beauty of the plant – and some supposed medicinal uses – caused it to be disseminated early on, for it is interesting about plants of use and beauty that they spread through the world with amazing speed. The Japanese, particularly, value the plant very highly, as a component of winter arrangements.

My own history with *Physalis alkekengi* occurred at two times in my life, when I was 8 years old, and when I was 50. At eight, I won the audition to play one of the Three Kings in the Shreveport St. Marks Episcopal Church Pageant, and that therefore required me to be fitted out with red satin pajamas ornamented with gold braid. It was a tedious process, with many tucks and pins, though I was comforted by

a fine vase of Chinese lanterns, which were far more interesting to me than the drapery on my small body.

At 50, in late October, I visited the garden of the Countess d'Andlau. It was an old garden, behind an old house, and at that season it wasn't much but twigs and berries, some of which had impressive pedigrees. ("Clementine Churchill gave me seed of that.)

But in a lower section of the garden, around a small terrace, there was a circle of Chinese lanterns, glowing in a watery French afternoon.

Physallis alkenbengi is never not worth growing, even if it is invasive, and some would say, weedy. It is a joy when the gardening year is done and a lot of good things are just memory and a vase of its dried inflated pods brings back the lovely prime of the summer garden.

I hope all this information is helpful. Mostly, it was ready to hand.

Love,
Wayne