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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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ICE FRINGED PLANTS

On a frosty winter morning, after a night free from wind, curious fringes or ribbons of ice are sometimes found along the dead stems of certain plants. The most striking and common of such formations are those seen on the stems of the dittany (Cunila origanoides), which has a perennial root but dies down to the ground in the autumn. On this plant the fringes consist of thin curving ribbons of ice, about as thick as a knife blade, from half an inch to two inches broad and sometimes six or seven inches long. One or more may form on a stem. More or less similar icy appendages are occasionally found on species of Pluchea, Conyza, Verbesina, Salvia, etc.

The mode of origin of these fringes remains something of a mystery, though they have been the subject of much investigation extending over a period of about a century. The water that forms them is brought up from the soil by capillary action and comes to the surface mainly or wholly through a row of minute openings. The fringe begins as a row of separate hair-like crystals, which merge into a continuous ribbon as they grow outward. Why they should form in a narrow line along the stem is unknown and some of the other facts connected with their formation still await explanation.

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