

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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NOWACK'S WEATHER PLANT

Toward the close of the nineteenth century a plant of the pea family, known botanically as Abrus precatorius, acquired a great deal of notoriety in Europe as a "weather plant." The species in question is sometimes called the "paternoster pea," on account of the use of its poisonous seeds in making rosaries.

An Austrian named Nowack claimed to be able to predict from the varying positions assumed by the leaves and branches of this plant a variety of mundane events, including not only storms and weather changes, but also earthquakes and the occurrence of firedamp in coal mines. As he could not monopolize his method of prediction by patenting the plant, he patented a special case for holding it. He took his vegetable wonder to London, where he succeeded in interesting the Prince of Wales, through whom he secured a letter of introduction to the authorities of Kew Gardens. He and his plant received a considerable amount of serious attention from the public and the newspapers until the absurdity of his claims was exposed in a Kew Bulletin.

Some of Nowack's friends claimed that it was the wretched English weather that had caused the plant to prophesy wrongly! Nowack is said to have sacrificed a fortune in his efforts to get his fantastic notions accepted by the world at large.

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