Poisonous Plants and Children

Poison Control State Wide Center 1-800-222-1222

Fact Sheet FS1130

Cooperative Extension

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Every year thousands of curious children taste, chew or swallow plants in their homes, gardens, yards, field or woodlands. There may be serious consequences. Death is possible. More common is discomfort, vomiting, and inflammation. Most often there is no effect as the plant is not toxic or the quantity ingested is small. Everyone caring for children should have the phone number of the Poison Control Center (1-800-222-1222) readily available. It is important to identify the ingested plant accurately so treatment will be appropriate. Prior to purchasing plants homeowners should consider their toxic properties. Some of the more common toxic plants are described below.

Azaleas and **rhododendrons** (*Rhododendron* species) are commonly grown in gardens. Some are native woodland plants. The leaves contain a toxin that produces gastrointestinal effects followed by headache, muscular weakness and cardiac malfunction. Chewing the leaves of **mountain laurel** and other laurels (*Kalmia* species) causes similar problems.

Castor bean (*Ricinus communis*) with its large green to red-purple leaves and spiny fruits is grown as an annual ornamental in New Jersey. It has become naturalized in warmer areas. The toxin (ricin) is found only within the seeds and is released only when the seeds are chewed, pulverized or digested. Ingestion of intact seeds rarely causes problems.

Dumbcane (*Dieffenbachia species*) is grown as a houseplant for its large leaves with variegated coloration (shades of green, ivory). Dumbcane thrives in low light and requires little care. The whole plant contains calcium oxalate crystals. Chewing on a leaf immediately produces intense pain and swelling that lessens without treatment. Systemic poisoning is not a problem.

Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*) is a biennial, blooming the second year of growth. The bell-shaped flowers in purple, pink or white are usually spotted on the inside. This attractive garden plant has escaped cultivation in some regions. All parts of the plant are poisonous. Foxglove leaves are the original source of the cardiac drug digitalis. Initial symptoms of ingestion are gastrointestinal, followed by potentially fatal effects on the heart.

Holly (*Ilex species*) berries (red, yellow, blue, black) are attractive to birds and children. Birds are not harmed, but children may develop gastrointestinal symptoms following ingestion of large quantities.

Lily-of-the-valley (*Convallaria majis*) is commonly grown in New Jersey as a ground cover. They may be forced into flower as winter houseplants. All parts of the plant and water from a container holding the leaves and flowers are poisonous, containing a digitalis-like substance. Initial symptoms of ingestion are gastrointestinal. Cardiac problems develop later. Rarely are sufficient quantities ingested to cause toxicity.

Oleander (*Nerium oleander*) is grown in tubs in New Jersey and outdoors in warmer climates. All parts of the plant contain the toxin, a cardioactive steroid resembling digitalis. Oleander sticks should not be used in wood fires or to roast marshmallows. Water from containers of oleander flowers may also be toxic.

Peace lilies (*Spathiphyllum species*) appear to be favored by houseplant-eating children. All parts of the plant contain calcium oxalate crystals that immediately cause painful sensations of the lips and mouth when ingested. The discomforts disappear without treatment.

Poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*), our brightly colored Christmas plant, rarely causes vomiting when eaten. It is mistakenly accused of toxicity. Other euphorbias may cause gastrointestinal symptoms when ingested and/or contact dermatitis.

Pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) is one of our most common attractive weeds. The perennial roots produce branching stems to 12′ in height. Children may make "ink" from the relatively nontoxic purple berries. Young spouts may be boiled and eaten. It is the leaves and roots that contain a toxin that may cause severe gastrointestinal distress.

Rhubarb (*Rheum x cultorum*), a perennial with long (2′ to 3′) leaf stalks and large leaves with wrinkled edges, is grown for its leaf stalk prized for pies, jams and sauces. The toxic portion of the plant is the raw leaf blade if eaten in sufficient quantity. Gastrointestinal symptoms are followed by binding of oxalates in the leaf with calcium in the body forming an insoluble precipitate that may damage the kidney.

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Solanum species, variously known as n**ightshade, love apple, horse nettle, Jerusalem cherry, star-potato vine,** etc. have berries of black, orange, yellow or red. Human poisoning is most often caused by eating immature (green) fruit. The symptoms are gastrointestinal. The uncooked sprouts and sun-greened skin of *Solanum tuberosum,* the common **white potato**, are toxic. Various species of *Datura* and *Brugmansia* commonly known as **angel's trumpet, devil's trumpet, jimson weed, thorn apple,** etc., are grown as houseplants, garden plants and some have become naturalized. The entire plant is toxic, containing atropine, scopolamine and other anticholinergic drugs. The seeds are usually the toxic agent but seeds and dried leaves are used as hallucinogenic agents. Initial symptoms of intoxication are dry mouth, difficulty swallowing and talking, and rapid heartbeat.

Yew (*Taxus species*) is found as a foundation plant near many homes. All parts except the red aril (flesh) surrounding the seed are toxic. Gastrointestinal, neurological, and cardiovascular effects may be seen, usually within one hour if sufficient quantities are ingested.

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