

Poisonous Plants Marg Hundt



Peterborough and Area Master Gardeners
<http://peterboroughgardens.ca/articles.html>

Poisonous Plants are plants that cause harmful effects in humans, pets, or livestock. They include native, introduced, and cultivated outdoor plants as well as indoor plants. Some food and herbal plants can also cause potential poisoning. Some poisons must be ingested whereas others, such as poison ivy, require only contact to elicit response in sensitive humans. Some chemicals must be modified before they are poisonous to animals, either by plant enzymes or in the stomachs of livestock.

Many plants possess toxic parts, are toxic unless processed, or are toxic at certain stages of their life eg.

- Potatoes – foliage and green-tinged tubers are toxic and can cause digestive disturbances, nervous symptoms
- rhubarb – leaf blades are poisonous causing kidney disorders, convulsions, and coma, but are rarely fatal
- tulips contain an allergen, *tuliposide A* which causes dermatitis in sensitive individuals Poisoning of humans and dogs has also been reported when tulip bulbs were mistaken for onions and were ingested. Tulips are not normally a problem to humans.
- daffodil “itch” from the sap of the narcissus include dryness, scaling and redness and fissures in the skin
- Chives - Horses have been reportedly poisoned in Japan by ingesting the leaves in early spring.
- Poinsettias are not poisonous according to the National Capital Poison Center, but they may cause irritation.
- Cocoa Mulch contains potentially toxic quantities of a lethal ingredient called Theobromine. It is lethal to dogs and cats, however 98% won't eat it. It smells like chocolate, they ingest this and die. Several deaths have already occurred. Theobromine is in all chocolate

- Horse chestnut tree – chestnuts, leaves and sprouts contain *esculin*, a glycoside. There are lots of reports of children being poisoned after they tried to make "tea " from the nuts or have chewed on the stems. The roots, branches and nuts falling into a pond will even stupify fish.
- Mushrooms are both poisonous and non-poisonous and grow side by side. Only a mushroom expert can tell the difference. It is dangerous to eat any mushroom that you have found outdoors. Cooking does not make them safe to eat.
- Some plants are so toxic that even the water they sit in can become contaminated. *Aconitum* (monkshood) is an example. Could such a pretty plant be so bad? Definitely! All parts of this plant are toxic. The toxicity of this pretty plant is a defense mechanism against herbivores.

The percentage of plants that are really harmful is quite small and exposures result in little or no toxicity and rarely are antidotes actually necessary. Most exposures are unintentional and it is likely that most of these were simply that – exposures and no toxin was ingested or if a small piece of plant was ingested, it was in a quantity insufficient to cause problems.

If you suspect poisoning, call the Poison Control Center 1-800-268-9017 or www.ontariopoisoncentre.com and be prepared to answer the following questions:

- any symptoms,
- name of the plant,
- how much and what parts were eaten,
- how recently it was eaten/touched,
- age if child

If ingested remove all parts that you can see, give small sips of water and don't try to throw up. If contact with skin wash immediately with lots of soap and water. If it is your pet call the veterinarian for more information. Skin problems can be;

- mechanical eg. barbs of Aloe plant,
- chemical eg. chili peppers, allergens eg. Elephanat's Ears,
- phototoxins, certain compounds increase the sensitivity of skin to ultraviolet light eg. chemicals from celery enter the skin directly by contact or after ingestion and the chemical is activated by sunlight and the sun-exposed areas my blister,
- Pseudophytophytodermitides eg. pesticides, fungicides, insects and soil products may each induce a dermatitis that is indistinguishable from one of the other syndromes.

There are plants that have real poisons to them that can affect your vital organs and should not be ignored. When in doubt check it out!

Should we avoid growing poisonous plants – indeed not – our landscapes would be pretty sparse not to mention the important role these plants play in providing habitat and food for beneficial insects. Instead, we should learn to identify plants, know their effects and be careful in sharing them with others.

The web has many sites listing poisonous plants.

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