

Fact sheet: poisonous plants

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Of the half a million or so known plant species, half produce beautiful flowers, a few can be eaten (14%), and even fewer are poisonous. In Australia accidental death from plant poisoning is extremely rare with only three deaths recorded over the past 35 years in the 0-14 age group. The plants involved were berries from the white cedar and yellow oleander fruit. In each case the plant was chewed or swallowed. However, many plants can produce symptoms of poisoning with children admitted to hospital—at least for observation.

Poisonous plants usually taste unpleasant, but this won't always stop a toddler. When toddlers taste something unpleasant or feel a burning sensation in their mouth, they are just as likely to swallow as to spit it out. Young children are curious and use their mouth as much as their fingers to investigate and explore. They can't tell what is safe to eat, and often aren't put off by smell, appearance, or taste.

Teach your children never to put leaves, stems, seeds, nuts or berries from plants in the garden into their mouths.



Left: White cedar, or *Melia azedarach*, is a large deciduous native tree with fern-like leaves. Flowers are pale purple and are followed by berries about 2cm long which turn yellow and wrinkle with age. Children are reported to have died after eating ripe berries. All parts are poisonous, but it is usually the fruit that is eaten. Symptoms can include nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, lethargy, confusion, coma, seizures, and death.

Photo Glenn Leiper

Right: The yellow oleander, often called the Cook Tree or *Cascabela thevetia*, is a hardy, imported tree with long shiny leaves and yellow fragrant flowers. The immature fruit is green and turns black, with two starchy kernels inside. The sap is milky and can cause irritation, blisters and dermatitis. All parts are poisonous, but it is the fruit and seeds which are mostly eaten. Symptoms from all oleanders can include a burning, numb sensation in the mouth, nausea and vomiting, seizures, dizziness and a slow or irregular heartbeat.

Photo: Mary Loudon Old Herbarium



Most common causes of hospital admissions

Common fungi—mushrooms

The Green Spored Parasol has a whitish cap and white gills which are greenish when mature. It is very common in lawns and gardens, and may cause violent vomiting, diarrhoea and stomach pain. The Yellow Stainer looks like an edible mushroom. However, it has a distinct yellow staining when the stem is cut near the base or bruised. The odour is strong and unpleasant (like kerosene). It is commonly found in clumps or fairy rings. Symptoms may occur immediately or within hours of eating and include intense nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and pain. Do not eat any mushrooms not commercially grown.



Nerium oleander

All oleanders are poisonous, and the Yellow Oleander has caused fatalities in children. The more commonly grown pink or white *Nerium oleander* is widespread in our gardens and has caused deaths in animals.

Oleanders contain toxins that affect the heart. All parts are poisonous, with a single leaf considered dangerous. The symptoms may include nausea, vomiting abdominal pain, lethargy, dizziness, slow heartbeat, seizures and coma.

Left: Green Spored Parasol.
Below: Yellow Stainer. Photos Dr Tony Young



Black (Blackberry) nightshade

Black nightshade is a common weed in Australia, growing up to ½ metre high. It has small white star-shaped flowers. The berries are small and purple-black when ripe. All green parts, including green berries, can cause headache, nausea and mild stomach upset. The ripe black berries are usually harmless. **Though commonly called 'nightshade', it is not the same plant as 'deadly nightshade'.**

Right: Black Nightshade.
Below: *Nerium oleander*.
Photo Mary Loudon Old Herbarium



The following plants may be harmful to children.

Contact the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26 immediately if your child eats any plant or garden products.

| PLANT | RISK |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| African Milk Bush <i>Synadenium grantii</i> . | Sap is corrosive. All parts are poisonous if eaten. |
| Agapanthus <i>Agapanthus orientalis</i> . | All parts may cause skin irritation. |
| Angels' Trumpet <i>Brugmansia x candida</i> . | All parts are poisonous if eaten. |
| Aroid Plants Family Araceae - includes: Arum Lily, Calla Lily, Flamingo Flower, fruit salad plant, Caladium, Cunjevoi, Dieffenbachia, Peace Lily, Madonna Lily, Philodendron , Elephant's Ear . | All parts of these plants are poisonous and if eaten or chewed can cause pain, burning and swelling of the lips, mouth, tongue and throat. Many of these plants also have irritant sap. |
| Black Bean Moreton Bay chestnut, <i>Castanospermum australe</i> , family Fabaceae. | If eaten the seeds can cause diarrhoea, vomiting, abdominal pain and dizziness. |
| Brazilian Nightshade <i>Solanum seaforthianum</i> , family Solanaceae. | All parts of the plant are poisonous and may cause gastro-intestinal irritation, nausea and diarrhoea. |
| Caster Oil Plant Castor bean, Palma Christi, <i>Ricinus communis</i> , family Euphorbiaceae | Eating the seeds may cause a burning in the mouth or throat, severe vomiting and diarrhoea. Symptoms may be delayed. |
| Cestrums Green cestrum, Night Blooming Jessamine, <i>Cestrum</i> species, family Solanaceae | All parts of these plants are toxic, especially the fruit. May cause headache, flushed skin, rapid pulse, temperatures, excess spit, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. The night-time fragrance of <i>C. nocturnum</i> may cause breathing problems, irritation nose and throat, headache, nausea and dizziness. |
| Crab's Eye Gidee-gidee, Jequirity bean, Rosary pea, Precatory bean, <i>Abrus precatorius</i> , family Fabaceae. | Chewed or broken seeds are toxic if eaten. Symptoms may be delayed for days and include nausea, vomiting diarrhoea, disorientation and death. |
| Cycads Cycas species, <i>Lepidozamia</i> species, <i>Macrozamia</i> species, families Cycadaceae and Zamiaceae. | If eaten the raw fruit may cause headache and severe gastro-intestinal irritation. Rarely leads to liver damage, coma or death. |

These are plants commonly found in Queensland. Your local nursery or the Queensland Herbarium (3896 9318) can help with non-urgent identification of the plants in your garden.

This fact sheet was compiled with assistance from the Queensland Poisons Information Centre and Professor John Pearn.

For more information call the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26 or

<http://www.health.qld.gov.au/poisonsinformationcentre>
or phone Kidsafe on 3854 1829.

| PLANT | RISK |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Duranta Golden Drowdrop. Sky Flower, Sheena's Gold , Aussie Gold , Geisha Girl, <i>Duranta erecta</i> , <i>Duranta repens</i> , family Verbenaceae. | If eaten the fruit may cause vomiting and diarrhoea. |
| Foxglove <i>Digitalis purpurea</i> , family Scrophulariaceae. | All parts of the plant are toxic if eaten and may cause nausea, Diarrhoea, abdominal pain and a slow heart rate. Sap may cause skin irritation. |
| Fruits and vegetables | Unripe fruit or vegetable may cause gastric irritation. Chillies are attractive to children and can cause significant pain on contact especially with the eyes, mouth, nose and genitals. |
| Lantana <i>Lantana camara</i> , family Verbenaceae. | Symptoms may be delayed several hours and include vomiting, diarrhoea, laboured breathing, dilated pupils and lethargy. Contact with the skin may cause irritation. |
| Naked Lady Pencil tree, Malabar tree, <i>Euphorbia tirucalli</i> , family Euphorbiaceae. | The milky sap may cause burning and blisters. In the eyes it may cause pain, swelling and temporary blindness. If eaten symptoms may include burning lips, tongue and mouth, excess spit and vomiting. |
| Physic Nut <i>Jatropha</i> species, family Euphorbiaceae. | All parts of the plant may cause burning in the throat, nausea, severe vomiting and diarrhoea. Symptoms can be delayed. |
| Sap— Many plants have irritant sap which can be milky, yellowish or clear. | Contact may cause rashes, or even serious burns. Eyes may become sore and swollen on contact. |
| Stinging trees <i>Dendrocnide excelsa</i> and <i>Dendrocnide moroides</i> , family Urticaceae | Contact with the leaves will cause severe stinging which can last for days to months. |
| Stinging nettles <i>Urtica urens</i> and <i>Urtica incisa</i> , family Urticaceae | Contact with the stinging hairs on the leaves may cause local reddening, itching and swelling. |
| Wintersweet Bushman's poison , <i>Acokanthera oblongifolia</i> , family Apocynaceae | If eaten all parts of the plant may cause severe vomiting, lethargy, restlessness and seizures. |

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