

Beware the Beauty:

Toxic and Poisonous Landscape Plants Lurking in Plain Sight

Lush, blooming gardens can be a refuge of peace and joy - but not all that flourishes is friendly. Among the vivid blossoms and elegant leaves, some popular landscape plants conceal a darker nature: they're toxic to people, pets, or both. It's a curious contradiction—how something so beautiful can pose such risks. <https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind/landscape/poisonous-plants-resources/common-poisonous-plants-and-plant-parts/>

Common Offenders in the Garden

Oleander (*Nerium oleander*) is the poster child for pretty but poisonous. Widely used for its drought resistance and colorful flowers, every part of this plant is highly toxic. Even a single ingested leaf can be fatal to a small child or pet. The danger doesn't stop with eating it—burning oleander clippings can release toxic fumes, making it doubly hazardous.

Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*) is another striking plant with a dangerous twist. Its tall stalks of tubular flowers are pollinator-friendly and eye-catching, but they contain digitalis glycosides—compounds that affect the heart and can be lethal if ingested. Ironically, these same compounds are used medically in regulated doses for heart conditions, showing the fine line between healing and harm.

Lily of the Valley (Convallaria majalis) is cherished for its dainty white bells and sweet scent. However, every part of the plant is toxic, particularly to children and animals. It contains cardiac glycosides, which can cause nausea, vomiting, slowed heartbeat, and even seizures if consumed.

Azaleas and Rhododendrons, favorites of Southern landscapes, contain grayanotoxins in their leaves and nectar. Ingesting any part of these plants can cause everything from gastrointestinal upset to cardiac issues. Even honey made from rhododendron nectar, known as “mad honey,” can be toxic.

Hydrangeas, with their fluffy clusters of flowers, might seem harmless—but they contain cyanogenic glycosides, compounds that can produce cyanide when metabolized. Although poisoning is rare, it’s still wise to prevent nibbling children or curious pets from sampling them.

Pet-Specific Dangers

Cat and dog owners should pay special attention to **sago palms (Cycas revoluta)**. Popular in tropical-themed gardens, all parts—especially the seeds—are extremely toxic to pets, causing liver failure and often proving fatal. Similarly, **autumn crocus** and **daffodils** can cause severe symptoms in pets, from vomiting to organ failure.

Cultivating Awareness

So, what’s a gardener to do? First, don’t panic - many toxic plants are only dangerous when ingested in significant amounts. However,

thoughtful placement and awareness go a long way. Here are a few tips to keep your landscape lovely and safe:

- **Label your plants** if you're unsure of their toxicity. There are plenty of plant identification apps that can help.
- **Instruct children** not to put leaves, flowers, or berries in their mouths.
- **Supervise pets** outdoors or create designated pet-safe garden zones.
- **Wear gloves and wash your hands** after gardening to avoid accidental ingestion or irritation.
- **Know your local poison control number** - Oklahoma Center for Poison and Drug Information at [\(800\) 222-1222](tel:8002221222). It's a good idea to store this number on your cell phone.

A Balanced Approach

Gardening is about connection - to the earth, to beauty, and to life itself. Including a few potentially toxic plants in your landscape doesn't mean you're cultivating danger. After all, many common houseplants like philodendrons and pothos are also mildly toxic. The key is to balance form and function with knowledge and care.

<https://extension.okstate.edu/announcements/grow-gardening-columns/june-2-2024.html>

So, plant with passion, but garden with wisdom. After all, nature is full of wonder – and sometimes with a little bite.