

Toxic Plants – What You Should Know About Them

We all know the story of Snow White, the princess who was offered a beautiful apple by a wicked witch posing as a gardener. One bite of the apple, Snow was promised, would make her wish of reuniting with her beloved prince come true. But the apple was poisoned and Snow fell into a death-like sleep.

The stuff of fairy tales for sure. But the story does offer important cautions for gardeners. Not every beautiful fruit or berry or flower is as innocent as it may appear. Some harbor sinister aspects that would bring an unhappy ending to any story. And whether it be the awful stomach ache of a child, or the death of a songbird, a sickly dog or cat or even the foundering of a backyard chicken, those endings can be avoided with a bit of research by the gardener before finalizing a landscape or designing a garden.

With its dark evergreen foliage and panicles of red berries, Nandina (common name Heavenly Bamboo) seems to brighten any landscape. However, those decorative berries produce cyanide in the digestive tract when swallowed. Toward winter's end, when food supply is short for waxwings and robins, the berries often prove temptingly fatal. If you have backyard chickens, this danger also extends to the flock. And most importantly, young children should be watched very closely around Nandina with its small, candy-like berries.

Another popular evergreen shrub with attractive, red, berry-like covered seeds is the Yew (*Taxus* sp.). In addition to producing cyanide, the Yew also produces ephedrine and taxine which affects the heart. All parts of the Yew are toxic. Oleander, which is usually grown as a container plant in Oklahoma and moved inside in winter, is another highly toxic shrub. Primarily at risk are puppies and kittens since chewing on just a leaf or two can cause serious issues. Even the common Privet (*Ligustrum Vulgare*) is a danger in the landscape. Both the leaves and the berries are toxic. While exuberant pets may chew the leaves on the stems, the berries are attractive to children.

As with shrubs, some commonly planted flowers also prove toxic. Prized by gardeners for its heat-loving bloom period and by pollinators for its nectar, Lantana is also a source of toxins contained in the berries formed after blooming. Seeds of morning glory, wisteria, and four o'clocks all contain toxins. The castor bean plant (*Ricinus*) which creates such a bold statement with its clusters of red seed pods against giant dark leaves

is one of the most toxic garden dwellers. While all parts of the plant are poisonous, the seeds are the most toxic.

Adult gardeners are not at much risk from toxic plants, though we do often pull and pick with our bare hands, then inadvertently touch our eyes or mouth while wiping sweat from our faces. The risk is mostly directed towards young children and pets. A bit of thoughtful research before planting will make our landscapes and gardens much safer for all to enjoy.

Resources:

Toxic Plants of Oklahoma and the Southern Plains, 1988, Cooperative Extension Service, Division of Agriculture, Oklahoma State University, E-868

[Central State University Biology Dept list of poisonous plants](#)

[Oregon State University poisonous plants](#)

[Cornell University website for poisonous plants](#)

[Texas A & M poisonous plants resources list](#)