

Holiday plants have ugly side

Many of our homes are decorated with the traditional holiday plants — holly, mistletoe, poinsettia, Jerusalem cherry, also known as Christmas cherry. Many of these plants have poisons that are poisonous if they are eaten.

Holly is an evergreen with shiny, dark green leaves and bright red berries. It is these berries that are the most toxic portion of the plant. Typical symptoms resulting from ingestion of the berries are nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and diarrhea. It is believed that between 20 and 30 berries can be fatal to children.

The leaves of the holly plant affect the central nervous system. Treatment depends on the quantity of the plant or berries ingested. Generally, vomiting should be induced unless the patient is comatose or has lost the gag reflex. Prompt treatment in a hospital emergency room is essential.

All parts of the mistletoe could be dangerous, but the small white berries are highly poisonous. Acute stomach and bowel irritation associated with vomiting and diarrhea are some symptoms of mistletoe poisoning. As small an amount as one or two berries could prove toxic to a child. Respiratory and cardiac difficulties resulting from eating the berries have led to death, especially in young children. Ingestion of any part of the mistletoe requires immediate treatment at the nearest emergency room.

THE MOST common Christmas plant is the poinsettia, which has an unjustified reputation as being very toxic. While the poinsettia has not been associated with any reports of death, it can produce abdominal pain, diarrhea and intense vomiting. Chewing the plant causes irritation of the mucous membranes which can lead to swelling of

the mouth and throat.

The milky sap of the poinsettia can produce temporary blindness if rubbed into the eyes or dermatitis if it comes into contact with skin. Treatment consists of flushing the eyes with cool water for five to 10 minutes and the patient should be seen by an ophthalmologist or other physician for further treatment. The sap should be washed from the skin with soap and water.

The Jerusalem cherry plants feature bright scarlet or yellow fruit. All parts of the plant are toxic. The leaves and

berries contain solanocapsine and solanine, respectively. Both are cardiac depressants which exhibit symptoms similar to digitalis toxicity — nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, headache, blurred vision, mental dullness and peripheral paralysis. Dermatitis can occur from direct contact with the fruit of the plant. Treatment is basically the same as for ingestion of the holly plant. Skin

irritations can be handled by thorough washing with soap and water.

All decorative Christmas plants should be kept out of the reach of children. The Providence Hospital Poison Information Center is available during business hours to answer routine questions about poisonous plants or other substances. The telephone number is 424-3125.

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