

The Case For The Guilty Garden

Half-Truths And Myths Exposed

"Deadly Harvest"... "The mystery-suspense stories? subject of potential hazards from plant life. The American Association of Nurserymen claims the

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publication of half-truths and myths in much of the material written on the subject works a serious disservice on the general public as well as on the florist and nursery communities.

In a statement recently issued by Robert F. Lederer, executive vice president of the AAN, the sources of a number of misconceptions regarding hazardous plants are identified and suggestions for positive, protective steps are made.

"The approach taken by most of the materials presented to readers makes a very strong impression that Mother Nature is lurking in every dark corner waiting to pounce with her green growing weapons of death," Lederer says.

"Some 700 plants have been identified as 'poisonous'...but that means anything from a mild allergy to severe indigestion or, in extremely rare and isolated cases, death if the wrong part of the wrong plant is eaten in the wrong way. Hysterical shouts and impetuous, ill-advised action are not the answer. Accurate information - given to the public in a properly prepared program of education - is."

The nursery association's statement points out that the major source of information on reported cases of "poisoning" from plants is the National Clearinghouse for Poison Control Centers in Washington, D.C., where statistical data is collected from hundreds of Poison Control Centers in the country.

"When a report of an inquiry is received at the National Clearinghouse it goes into the computer as a reported case of ingestion," the statement says, "and the writer who is careless can translate that as a case of plant poisoning."

example. Somewhere in this last year, someone called a poison control center and said something like, "My child has just eaten wild blackberries." He is in danger?" The people at the poison control center probably looked in their records and said, "No danger. They're perfectly safe." But that call about blackberries...and two others like it...are listed in the Clearinghouse report for 1970 as cases of ingestion - and blackberries are listed in their rundown of "Types of Poisoning."

A quick count shows at least 25 titles of harmless substances like blackberries on that list. Beans, for instance. Mulberries. Spices. Wild strawberries. One-third of the cases of plant ingestion reported by the National Clearinghouse in 1970 were in reference to plants or products of that nature which do not belong on a list of dangerous plants."

The published report of the National Clearinghouse covering last year lists two deaths resulting from the ingestion of plants.

Lederer looked into those two cases. "One was from an overdose of peyote - an hallucinogenic drug that grows wild in the Southwest," he reports. "The other death was attributed to crabapple. Now, the medical authorities agree that crabapples, raw, in jelly, or in pies are perfectly safe and rather delicious...so we questioned the clearinghouse on that one. Here's what they told us: 'The 1970 death listed to crabapple was in error and due to a punching error.' In other words, it was a clerical mistake. No death occurred."

"But just wait: soon you'll be reading lurid stories about the deadly crabapple which is striking down innocent victims! And when that happens, please remember - it just isn't so."

The nursery industry official also points out that the persistence of "old wives' tales" tends to keep many people misinformed about a number of plants, and uses the folklore surrounding the poinsettia as an example. He describes research conducted by two Ohio State University scientists, Robert Stone and W. J. Collins, to test the supposed danger of ingesting portions of that popular Christmas plant.

"They mixed batches of homogenized poinsettia parts and force-fed the mixture in large doses to 150 laboratory

rats. (They had to force-feed the stuff because poinsettias really taste awful.)

"WHAT HAPPENED? Nothing. None of the rats threw up, or stopped eating, or got anorectic... or died."

"In other words, their results coincided with those of other scientific investigators who have analyzed the whole plant and found the extracts to contain common plant sterols or triterpenes - none considered commonly toxic. And they are unable to find any authenticated record of a person dying from eating poinsettias."

Lederer quotes the Director of the Division of Hazardous Substances and Poison Control at the Food and Drug Administration's Bureau of Product Safety: "We concur with the investigators that large doses of homogenate of the poinsettia plant are not toxic to the rat...to our knowledge the ingestion of small amounts of the poinsettia plant has not presented a serious health hazard."

The statement published by the American Association of Nurserymen calls for "accurate, reasonable and factual information on the subject of hazardous plants, free of flaming words and alarmist phrases," and rejects two possible courses of action which have been proposed at one time or another.

"Now and then someone will propose that all plants identified as poisonous be outlawed and destroyed," Lederer's statement says. "This is just plain impractical. There is no way to eliminate all plant life which could be harmful if it were eaten in the wrong quantity or in the wrong way."

"Because potato shoots or leaves can cause indigestion doesn't mean that we stop eating potatoes. The one death from plant poisoning recorded in 1969 was from eating rhubarb leaves - but that doesn't mean we should make rhubarb pie illegal."

ANOTHER suggestion has been that all plants with harmful potential be labeled with some kind of warning. "In most cases, plants involved in reports of adverse effects are native plants which people come in contact with in the wild, and the task of labeling them is pretty ludicrous," Lederer says. Even if a label were required there is no assurance it would be kept on a plant once it is added to the home landscape. The background stems of the beautiful iris, for

example, cause a digestive upset if they are eaten. It is unlikely that a label on an iris bulb would be kept on display after planting.

"Another point...73 per cent of the reports of cases involving plants going through the National Clearinghouse in 1970 involved children under five years of age. That's an age when written instructions have very little value. It's an age when children are taught to stay out of the medicine cabinet, out of the street, out of electric sockets...and away from a long list of threatening things."

THE NURSERY industry proposes five steps to be taken as protection against the danger which exists from those plants which are harmful. The first rule, and the best of all, they say, is this: "The effective way to deal with the problem of hazardous substances - any suspicious substances - is to avoid them. Just never eat anything which is unknown to you. And, as part of that rule, be sure every child in the family learns that same lesson."

The second step: "Become familiar with all the plant life in your area, yard and home. Know them by name. Your nursery garden center or florist can help you identify those which could cause an adverse reaction under certain circumstances...and it will be good to have the scientific name for them."

The third point: "If your children use any kind of seeds or fruits or stems as playthings or as skewers for marshmallows, be sure you know what they are. If you are not sure, substitute

them with something you recognize."

Fourth: "Avoid smoke from any burning substance - including plant material - unless you know exactly what it is and that it is harmless."

And the fifth point: "In any case of suspected ingestion of an unknown substance call your doctor or the Poison Control Center. Be prepared, if at all possible, to give the name of the substance involved, and save any evidence which might help identify it."

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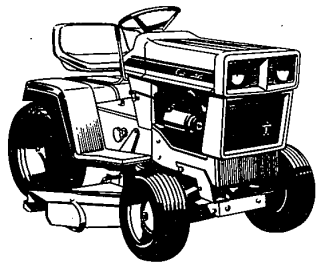
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mination will be poor. Transplant or thin indoors when an inch tall so that plants left are three inches apart. Move them outdoors when frost danger is past. If you wish a solid mass of color, space daisy plants six inches apart. Combine them with pansies for forget-me-nots or both for unusual effects.

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