



Lots of plants are poisonous or capable of causing highly allergic reactions. Some will also pierce you with their sharp spines. Few actually do lasting harm but some should be treated with care and respect. Garden and household chemicals, fires, backyard swimming pools and even ladders are far more dangerous backyard hazards for children than plants.

Who's at risk?

Children that are crawling or toddling, particularly around twelve months of age, are most at risk of eating strange bits of plants. To reduce the likelihood of babies and young children eating anything poisonous take the following precautions:

- Teach children not to eat anything straight from a plant or bush.
- Fence off or remove known poisonous or dangerous plants (see list).
- Keep the **Poison Information Centre** phone number **13 11 26** near your phone.

Symptoms to recognise

Symptoms of poisoning from plants can include:

- vomiting.
- stomach cramps.
- irregular heart beat.
- burning to the mouth.
- convulsions (fits).

The type and severity of symptoms will vary according to the type of plant eaten, the amount swallowed and the size of the child. The most common problems are stinging around the mouth and skin allergies.

First Aid

If you suspect a child has been exposed to something poisonous or harmful, first aid measures include:

- **For skin contact** - gently wash the skin with clear running water.
- **For eye contact** - irrigate the eye with clear running water for 20 minutes.
- **For swallowed plants** - remove any remaining plant pieces and wash out child's mouth.
- **Phone the Poison Information Centre on 13 11 26 for further information.**

If you need to go to hospital, take a piece of the plant with you if you can.

If your child is having difficulty breathing, is unconscious or fitting call an ambulance on 000.

Is it possible to recognise a poisonous or harmful plant?

There are no common characteristics of form, colouring, odour or taste, which distinguish a poisonous or harmful plant from a non-poisonous plant. But as a general rule of thumb, plants with a bitter taste, funny smell, milky sap or red seeds or berries may be poisonous.

To avoid poisoning, we need to learn to recognise and avoid poisonous plants so that we can teach our children to also avoid poisonous plants.



Plants to watch out for

To help you find your way through the lists of poisonous garden plants we've assessed their likely risk. Many plants have poisonous bulbs or roots but as these are usually safely underground, they are not likely to poison anyone.

Others taste so awful that it is difficult to eat enough to cause a serious injury. **Oleander**, for example tastes so bitter and unpalatable that it is difficult to accidentally eat very many of the leaves.

On the other hand there are plants that look appealing but contact can have bad results. See the list on plants to avoid.

Categories of poisonous or dangerous plants

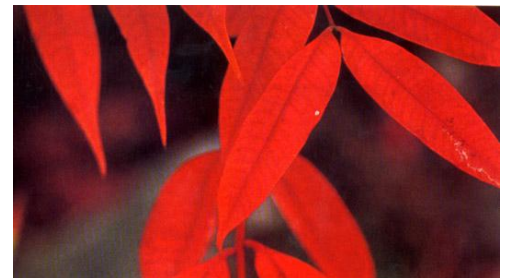
1. Danger! Don't plant.
2. Avoid these plants if you have children.
3. Poisonous, treat with caution.
4. Poisonous, but not usually a concern.

1. Danger! Don't plant.

These are highly poisonous or allergic plants, which shouldn't be included in gardens.

Asthma or stick weed (*Parietaria judaica*)

Although a weed, this plant may be associated with asthma attacks and can also cause skin allergies. Remove it from your garden and surroundings. It can be a weed of wastelands and footpaths particularly around Sydney and coastal NSW.



Rhus (*Toxicodendron succedaneum*)

Most people are very allergic to all parts of this plant. It is classified as weed in most areas. Don't plant it or allow self sown plants to grow. Remove existing plants with care. Cover your hands and body to avoid contact. If you have an allergic reaction, don't touch the tree again - get someone else to remove it.

● Yellow oleander (*Thevetia peruviana*)

All parts of this plant are toxic. Seeds are very poisonous but also highly appealing, especially, to kids, often called lucky nuts. Plants are evergreen with yellow tubular flowers. Mainly found in warm climates or coastal gardens. Yellow oleander is different to the oleander commonly found in Sydney, Australia. See the "Poisonous, treat with caution" section of this fact sheet for information on Oleander (*Nerium Oleander*).



2. Avoid these plants if you have children.

Avoid handling these plants and don't grow them where children play or in areas where you walk.

- **Cactus and many succulents (all species with spines)**

Stylish but highly dangerous, especially to eyes. If you want to grow succulents, plant those without spines such as *Agave attenuata*.



- **Chillies (especially hot varieties)**

Chillies especially the small pretty coloured forms are very attractive to children. Although eating them is unlikely to be fatal hot chillies can cause children a lot of damage and distress. If you love chillies, warn children not to touch.

- **Dumb cane (*Dieffenbachia*)**

Is a popular indoor plant but if it is eaten it can cause the mouth to become highly irritated and swell. It will not do any permanent injury and will not affect the brain.

- **Mushrooms and toadstools**

There are many highly toxic species and it is difficult to tell the difference between edible and inedible forms. Particularly dangerous are death caps (which have caused deaths in the ACT) and the attractive fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) which is red with white spots. Most of the toxic species are found in forests or among trees not in backyards.

3. Poisonous, treat with caution.

These plants contain poison and can be dangerous if they are eaten. Learn to recognise these plants and teach your children that they should not be eaten. If you are concerned about having them in a garden where there are babies and young children, fence them off until the children are older.

- **Angels trumpet (*Brugmansia*)**

All parts of the plants are toxic. The flowers can cause hallucinations and may appeal to risk-taking young people.



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- **Cycads**

The seeds are bright red and yellow and look appealing but are poisonous and should not be eaten. When used as bush tucker, the seed is carefully leached of toxins before they are ground into flour.



- **Grevilleas (especially 'Robyn Gordon')**

Grevilleas can cause dermatitis but are rarely dangerous unless they are being pruned or propagated by cutting. Wear gloves to reduce contact.

- **Oleander (*Nerium oleander*)**

All parts are poisonous but taste awful. Growing them as standards keeps the leaves and flowers out of reach of children. Always wash your hands after pruning oleanders as the sap can irritate the skin and eyes.



- **Poinsettia**

The sap is an irritant, so handle plants with care. The leaves and seeds can cause delirium if eaten.

- **Rhubarb leaves**

The stalks are edible but the leaves contain a toxin. Don't eat the leaves and don't feed leaves to chooks or pet birds.

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- **White cedar**

After the leaves fall from the tree, yellow seeds are left which are toxic. These trees are however fast growing shade trees which do well in northern and inland gardens.

- **Wisteria**

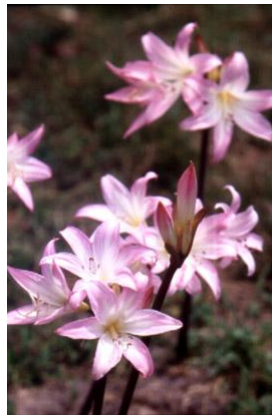
Eating the seeds/pods can cause gastric pain and vomiting.

4. Poisonous but not usually a concern.

The following plants often appear on lists of poisonous plants but the poisonous part (for example the root), is usually out of sight and reach or not likely to be eaten, so don't worry unduly.

- **Agapanthus**

The underground parts are poisonous.



- **Amaryllis**

The bulbs are poisonous.

- **Arum lily**

All parts of the plant are poisonous, including the bulbs.



- **Azaleas and rhododendrons**

Are poisonous, but only if eaten in great quantity.



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- **Daffodils and other narcissus**

The bulbs are poisonous.



- **Foxgloves (*Digitalis*)**

Are poisonous, they contain the heart medicine digitalis.

- **Lily-of-the-valley**

The bulbs are poisonous.

Remember

- Teach children not to eat anything straight from a plant or bush.
- Fence off or remove known poisonous or dangerous plants (see list).
- Keep the Poisonous Information Centre phone number 13 11 26 near your phone.

We would like to thank Jennifer Stackhouse and Burke's Backyard for the text and Burke's Backyard magazine (Brent Wilson and Lorna Rose) for the photos.

This fact sheet is for education purposes only.
Please consult with your doctor or other health professional
to make sure this information is right for your child.

This document was reviewed on 24th February 2010