

Cute Killers: Ornamental Plants that can cause you harm



Most plants contain some level of toxins for defense. After all, they're plants. They can't go anywhere. Through millennia of trial and error, both animals and human beings have figured out which plants are safe, which are lethal, and which are somewhere in between. Fortunately, artificial selection and cooking methods have all but eliminated the threat of toxins in everyday foods. But you may be surprised to find out the incredibly lethal plants often hanging around the neighborhood park – or gracing your tabletop in the form of a centerpiece.

1. *Castor Bean*



Castor oil – for anyone unlucky enough to have been force spoon-fed this healthy yet disgusting fluid as a child, you may be surprised to learn that an ingredient in the castor bean just happens to be the deadliest plant poison on earth. Literally. Just one tiny castor bean is enough to kill an adult within a few minutes. Castor oil is made safe (but not tasty) with the removable of the lethal compound known as ricin. Amazingly, castor bean plants are grown for decorative purpose all over the place, particularly in California.

2. *Rosary Pea*



The rosary pea may sound sweet and downright pious, but it's actually a very dangerous plant. Its seeds contain a particular lectin known as abrin; if chewed and swallowed, death will follow shortly. The seeds are easily identified with their distinctive bright red jacket and single black dot (almost like a reverse Black Widow spider). Abrin causes vomiting, fever, nausea and seizures.

3. Monkshood



Another unassuming plant – until you learn that the nickname for monkshood is actually “wolfsbane”. That’s owing to its once common use by farmers as a very effective wolf extermination tool. The monkshood has the distinction of evidently being the bane of many creatures: its nicknames include womens bane and leopard’s bane, though it is also known as blue rocket and devil’s helmet. The beautiful blue/violet flowers were crushed by the ancient Greeks and the derived toxin was used in poisonous darts.

4. Bushman’s poison



The aptly-named Bushman’s poison has famously been used by a South African tribe to poison the tips of their arrows. Though the plant produces pleasantly scented flowers and a tasty plum-like berry, the milky sap can be fatal. The leaves, however, have medicinal properties and are used to treat snake and insect bites.

Bushman’s poison is also known as wintersweet.

5. Angel’s trumpet

Note: there are many of these bushes in Sarasota!



Angel's Trumpet is a highly attractive and popular flowering shrub. It has trumpet shaped blooms, in a variety of colors including white, peach, yellow and orange. Hummingbirds are attracted to the bright blooms. Related to petunias, tomatoes and potatoes, the angel’s trumpet is a highly effective hallucinogen and can be lethal. .If

you have children or pets, seriously consider the risks before growing this plant.

6. Water Hemlock



This is the poison hemlock famously drunk by the Greek philosopher Socrates.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, the water hemlock is the most toxic plant in North America. The bush grows near streams and ponds in mountain meadows. The flowers and stems are safe, but the stalky roots contain a deadly toxin that causes

convulsions and eventually a painful death.

7. English Yew



The English Yew is one of the deadliest trees on the planet. The evergreen has a majestic and lush appearance and is fairly common in forests of Europe and North America. The branches are often cut and brought inside for holiday decorations. All parts of the plant except for the berries are extremely poisonous. The toxin causes convulsions and paralysis. The yew can slow down a rapidly beating heart, but it is deemed too dangerous in modern medical practice to be of use. The yew acts rapidly there is no antidote.

8. Snakeroot



Snakeroot is a bushy herb, growing only 3 feet tall. When cows consume the attractive fluffy white blooms and stems of the snakeroot, their milk and bones become saturated with the toxin. Nursing calves and lambs may die from their mothers' milk

contaminated with snakeroot even though the mother animals show no signs of poisoning. Cattle, horses, and sheep are the animals most often poisoned.

Humans who consume these contaminated animal products will develop “milk sickness”. In fact, this is what killed Abraham Lincoln’s mother.

9. Strychnine Tree



Native to Asia, the deadly poisons lie within the green fruit of the tree. The use of strychnine is highly regulated in many countries, and is mostly used in baits to kill wild rodents. Most accidental poisonings occur by breathing in the powder or by absorption through the skin.

Queen Cleopatra famously forced servants to commit suicide by means of a strychnine tree’s fruit seeds in order to determine if it would be the best means for her own suicide. Upon seeing their agony (which included painful vomiting, facial contortions and convulsions), she opted for the apparently less horrific choice of a cobra bite.

10. Poinsettia



A native to Mexico, the poinsettia is the most famous plant during the holiday season throughout the world.

Although they have a bad rap, poinsettia plants are only *mildly* toxic to cats and dogs. The milky white sap found in poinsettias contains chemicals that are mildly irritating to the skin or stomach and may sometimes cause diarrhea and vomiting. If the milky sap is exposed to skin, a dermal irritation (rash) may develop. Rarely, eye exposure can result in a mild conjunctivitis (pink eye).

11 Oleander

Note: these bushes are very popular in Florida



Although the oleander is a very pretty, unassuming plant, it is very deadly. Though native to parts of the Mediterranean and Asia, it is now widely cultivated throughout the world. In Florida, it is often grown in the center area of long stretches of the interstate.

Just one leaf can kill an adult, and fatal poisonings have resulted from minimal exposure to the twigs, blooms and berries. Fatalities among horses and other livestock are common. Once ingested, oleander goes to work simultaneously on the nervous system, the cardiovascular system, and the digestive tract.

12. Nightshade



Also known as the devil's cherry, black cherry, great morel and belladonna, the nightshade is toxic from tip to top. Containing atropine, those who ingest even a small amount of the plant will soon notice they have lost their voice. Respiratory trouble and convulsions follow. The plant is a problem because its cherries are so sweet and children are frequently attracted to the wild fruit.

Strangely, horses, birds, sheep, goats and pigs seem to be immune to the effects of nightshade.