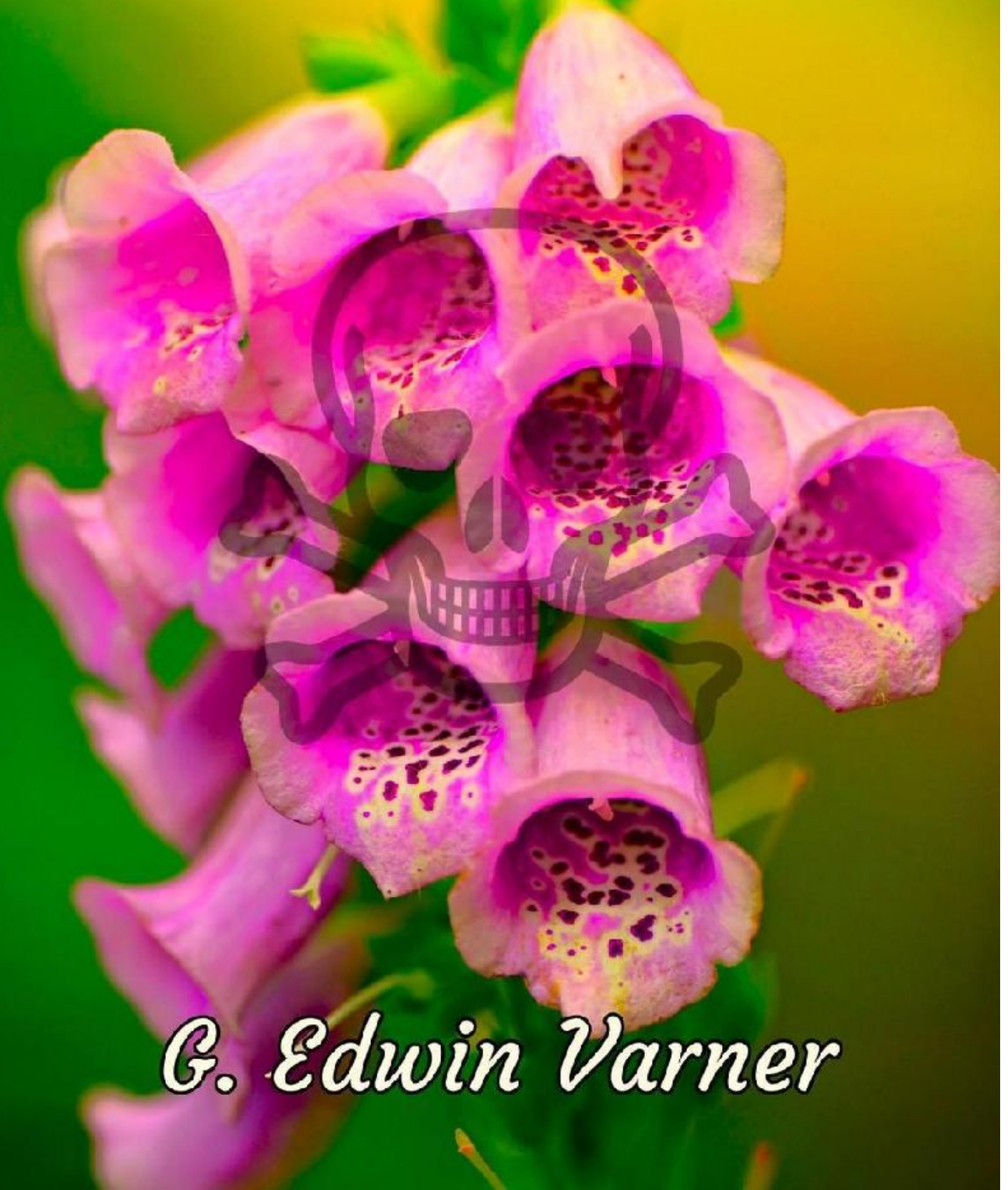


# Fatal Floral Attraction



*G. Edwin Varner*

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FATAL FLORAL ATTRACTION

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Written by G. Edwin Varner.

# Preface

This ebook differs from my previous publications because it does not recommend the following plants to grow in your flower garden. This publication is a guide to identifying those toxic plants that pose the greatest danger to your health and family.

If you overlook their poisonous nature, these plants are popularly grown and admired for their beautiful flowers. Still, they should be handled with the utmost care or avoided. You, your children, and your pets will become seriously ill and possibly die from accidentally eating them. Be extremely careful if you grow them in your beds or borders.

It's important to note that the plants listed here are not the only highly toxic ones. In fact, almost all plants, whether in gardens or indoors, have some degree of poisonous properties. This ebook provides valuable insights into the most toxic garden plants, their poisoning symptoms, and lessons learned from historical accounts of unfortunate individuals who fell victim to these potentially deadly plants.

Unlike my previous ebooks, this one does not provide growing or hardiness information about the plants listed. Instead, it offers a different perspective. It's a call to reconsider adding these plants to your garden, especially if you're new to flower gardening.

Don't even plan or attempt nefarious actions when learning about these plants. Modern forensics can easily and quickly determine what poison belongs to what plant. The sole purpose of this book is to identify and avoid some lethal garden plants sold as seed or as mature plants.

Portions of this publication's content are from my previous ebooks on different floral subjects. I revised the wording and corrected some now-noticeable factual and grammatical errors.

The digital photos are of the flowers at my home, public gardens, many nurseries within my area, and Creative Commons (CC0) licensed images.

# Introduction

I will begin this ebook by “borrowing” a famous suggestion from the late Douglas Adams’s science fiction serial BBC radio play and novel series *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. It is, **“DON’T PANIC!”**

This is not to alarm you, but you should consider your home flower garden the most dangerous area on earth. Does that mean you must wear those bulky hazmat protection suits while puttering around amongst the flowers? No, but considering what those beautiful plants contain within their sappy green bodies, you may not scoff at donning that non-fashionable attire. Bad joking aside, exposure to the following flowering plants’ natural toxic or poisonous compounds is dangerous, even at minimal concentrations.

Why are our garden plants (and most home interior decorating plants) so potentially poisonous? No matter where they set down roots, all plants must protect themselves from herbivorous animals. Some plants display a suit of armor armed with fuzzy to prickly spines or thorns to protect their stems and leaves. That’s fine for some protection from being eaten, but it is not enough.

Mother Nature has devised over millions of years to produce chemical warfare. The primary function of these chemical compounds is to prevent herbivorous insects and animals from eating them. Most toxic compounds produced are foul-tasting, and this usually stops most animals from continuing to eat. There are no dead beasts everywhere, for most animals have learned to avoid any particular plant that makes them feel sick to their stomach.

Fortunately, we value most flower garden plants for their beauty and have an innate behavior of not eating them. But the potential exists for that to happen. Touching or handling some of them can result in potentially severe skin irritations. The ultimate threat is life-threatening poisonous types that should be avoided against accidentally eating their flowers, seeds, roots, and leaves.

You should consider the potential harm of these plants growing in your flower garden, especially if you or your neighbors have small children. Also, never have these plants growing near, or especially in, your vegetable garden.

If you review the gardening books in your local library (or online, like on Amazon), several highlight the gastronomic enjoyment of edible flowers. That is fine, but conversely, I found few books concerning highly toxic plants, some described here, which appear similar to the safe-eating plants. It may give new gardeners or lay people a false sense of security by adding willy-nilly decorative petals or leaves to food.

Another concern is foraging in the wild and mistakenly selecting what you think are safe plants. Wild mushrooms are notorious for accidental poisonings and present an ever-present concern.

Our pets are also prime targets for possible poisoning. Have you seen dogs and cats eat blades of grass? They do this to vomit fur and “something bad” they ate earlier. What if no grass is available? They will frantically search for any plant that may substitute to initiate the vomiting response. The problem is they may eat the leaves of a poisonous type found in a flower border. Yes, it does happen.

While reading this ebook, you may think I am overreacting to the dangers of having these plants in any garden. After all, generations of gardeners and their families have survived while growing the gorgeous displays of several plants mentioned in this publication. However, with the increased presentation of “fake facts” on the internet, especially on social media, and more people not being acquainted with raising flowers and vegetables, there is the potential to eat these dangerous plants. If you doubt that can happen, you are wrong.

Grow and enjoy the following potentially fatal floral attractions, but keep them away from the vegetable garden, your children, and your pets. Beauty is one thing, but safety matters most.

I must issue a protective legal disclaimer statement. All the plants listed in this ebook can cause serious illness, injury, or death. The information

within this publication is for educative purposes only and to encourage all readers to learn from and protect others concerning the danger of growing or handling these plants.

I am not responsible for any nefarious or sinister actions nor the accidental or deliberate injury caused by the use or misuse of these plants if the reader commits to endanger any person's or animal's health and life.

I report facts about the following garden plants, not spreading falsehoods or inspiring unfounded conspiracy theories.

# Aconitum – Monkshood or Wolfsbane

## *Aconitum species*



Why are all the lovely flowering plants also the deadliest? Look at those gorgeous blue-purple blossoms on this perennial called **Blue Lagoon**. Other varieties offer all shades of blue to white flowers. The common names vary from the blossom shape of a medieval monk's hooded cloak to the sinister application of the plant's sap to kill wolves and to something as small as mice. The key word is 'bane,' meaning something that causes death or misery.

Mama Nature had the foresight to make this plant distasteful to prevent every herbivore from dropping dead all over our gardens. Its taste is reportedly so unpleasant that accidental poisonings from eating this

plant have been rare for most of recorded history. One bite can make you wish you hadn't been foolish enough to take a taste.

Nibbling on any part of this plant isn't the only action you should avoid. Handling the stems and leaves will transfer the toxic chemicals into your skin. Your fingertips may tingle, which should make you worry. If not ingested, you should soon recover. The lesson here is to wash your hands immediately after handling it when planting, or, best of all, wear latex or garden gloves.

Symptoms of Aconite poisoning after eating any part of the plant begin with tingling of fingers and mouth, followed by increased stomach "warmth" and aching, then nausea followed by severe pain. Meanwhile, your pulse and breathing become slow and difficult. Within an hour of ingestion, death can result from cardiac arrest (your heart suddenly stops beating.) WOW! That's scary just for eating a small part of it.

If you find this plant or any varieties in a garden center, advise the owner or operators to remove it by calmly informing them of its dangerous toxicity. Your local center may accept your warning and stop its sale. Be brave, for you may prevent an innocent life from a horrendous ending.

# Amanita – Death Cap Mushrooms

*Amanita phalloides; Amanita muscaria and other species*



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I would be negligent if I omitted these “pretty” but pretty awful hijackers of your home lawn and gardens. Yes, they are not flowering plants but fungi. Still, they sprout from the ground with the typical large mushroom shape, with some, especially *Amanita muscaria*, having colorful mature caps. The tragedy of them growing near your home is they look identical to safe-to-eat species in the young “button” growth stage, like the common *Agaricus* field or lawn mushroom. The *Amanita* types are so toxic, so outrageously deadly, that eating a small portion is a slow-acting death sentence.

*Amanita phalloides*, shown above, commonly referred to as the Death Cap, is less colorful than *Amanita muscaria*. The young cap is usually pale to butter yellow but becomes tan when older. According to interviews, a few lucky survivors said it was the best-tasting “shrooms” they had ever eaten.

This mushroom is native to the forests of Europe but has become invasive throughout the temperate world. The wind can carry the spores far, but most dispersal is by transporting contaminated soil from place to place. They need specific soil types under oak, pine, or other hardwood or coniferous trees to begin “germinating.” These mushrooms mycelium form symbiotic relationships with these trees’ root systems. You will only find mature mushrooms growing if your home lies within or near these trees. Most poisonings happen when people go “shroom hunting” within woodlands containing these trees and come across them, thinking they are similar-looking edible types.

So, if you live near mature oak, pine, or spruce trees, be aware that you may encounter these mushrooms in the fall.

Other *Amanita* mushrooms, such as *Amanita virosa*, are commonly found in woodlands but also in lawns throughout Europe. At the same time, similar species are native to North America. They all share the nickname “Destroying Angel” for looking identical to the common edible lawn mushroom.

For a better understanding, here is an important entry in the **Wikipedia** website:

*“The name destroying angel applies to several similar, closely related species of deadly all-white mushrooms in the genus Amanita. They are Amanita virosa in Europe and A. bisporigera and A. ocreata in eastern and western North America, respectively. Another European species of Amanita referred to as the destroying angel, Amanita verna—also referred to as the “Fool’s mushroom”—was first described in France in 1780. Destroying angels are among the most toxic known mushrooms; both they and the closely related death caps (A. phalloides.)*

*Destroying angels can be mistaken for edible fungi such as the button mushroom, meadow mushroom, or the horse mushroom. Young destroying angels that are still enclosed in their universal veil can be mistaken for puffballs, but slicing them in half longitudinally will reveal internal mushroom structures. This is the basis for the common recommendation to slice in half all puffball-like mushrooms picked when mushroom hunting. Mushroom hunters recommend that people know how to recognize both the death cap and the destroying angel in all of their forms before collecting any white-gilled mushroom for consumption.”*

Well, that’s easier said than done. For another “devil in an angel disguise,” the next one displays colorful attire.



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*Amanita muscaria* (shown above) is incredibly beautiful, with a bright red to yellow cap and white spots or “bumps.” Most people will

“instinctively” avoid this type since, well... let’s be frank, it looks deadly—and it is. But the younger button stage fools people into thinking it is edible.

I have a neighbor who has a grove of tall spruce trees, and each fall, several *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms “bloom” under the trees. I have made it a point to remind this neighbor of their danger, never to eat them, and to be sure to knock them down and carefully dispose of them. He sometimes does, but usually not. He has playful dogs, and nearby neighbors’ children play near and under the trees. So, I’ve taken matters in hand to do this potentially life-saving act. I am always afraid the children and dogs will play with these mushrooms and accidentally bite into one. All it takes is one “shroom” to start a tragic series of events.

What happens when you eat any *Amanita* mushrooms? First of all, as a reference point to help you understand the symptom process, all it takes is to eat a few hearty bites of any part of the mushroom. Most connoisseurs of those safe-to-eat “meaty” mushrooms prefer the larger button stage before the cap fully expands. Cooking or frying the mushrooms in butter does little to alter or destroy the chemical toxins. That being said, the horror show takes six to 24 hours to begin.

At first, it is severe stomach cramps, followed by vomiting and excessive dehydrating diarrhea. People falsely believe they have the flu and fail to get immediate medical attention. Meanwhile, the person’s liver and kidneys are being destroyed by the toxins, which causes a steady increase of other toxic chemicals to form, eventually causing massive organ failure leading to coma and, finally, death.

Is a treatment available to prevent this bodily carnage from advancing? Not really. There is currently a “possible” treatment (if poisoning is suspected early), but curing advanced symptoms is ineffective.

If I may be permitted to side-track you for a moment, my local PBS (*Public Broadcasting Service*) station showed an older episode of the outstanding British TV series *Midsomer Murders*. An episode in Series 4 (2000-2001) is named “*Destroying Angel*.” The plot involves a wealthy

hotel owner murdered while mushroom hunting in a forest. One of the prime suspects also becomes a victim when unknowingly eats a few *Amanita virosa* mushrooms.

Instead of saying, "*he is dying of eating poisoned mushrooms,*" the show (especially the actor) displayed the horror of the tortured physical reactions of his body and the terrified emotions of knowing he is slowly dying and nothing can be done to help him. WOW! That was gut-wrenching (sorry for the unfortunate pun) acting!

I have to hand it to the British for realism in showing grisly murder. Then again, they have plenty of experience due to Will Shakespeare, Agatha Christie, and other notables of murder writing. (Here in the USA, shooting a gun is the usual tedious method. Absolutely no imagination whatsoever.)

Getting back on track, finally — don't eat these mushrooms and several other known and unidentified types. Don't tempt fate. Purchase all culinary mushrooms from your grocery store instead.

# Asclepias – Milkweed

## *Asclepias species*



As the name implies, we classify them as weeds, especially in agricultural areas. Still, some species are native to the tropics. The plants are durably hardy because of a thick taproot. If you damage a leaf, stem, and seed pod, a milky white, liquid substance (called latex) oozes out, which contains cardiac glycoside compounds poisonous to us and many grazing or browsing animals. This toxin instantly disrupts or “short-circuits” heart-beating functions. Unless quickly treated, the result leads to heart failure.

Another name for these perennials is ‘Butterfly Weed,’ which attracts many butterflies, especially the Monarch Butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*), during the summer. This plant (no matter the species) is vital for its

survival and is the only food source for their growing caterpillars. A few other insects, like the Monarch, are the only creatures that suffer no ill effects from eating these plants. Birds can become sick if they eat Monarch caterpillars and the adults. Most will vomit the butterfly and learn never to eat them again. Deer will avoid these plants on the first nibble because the taste is extremely bitter.

Believe it or not, people eat these plants! Reports from numerous websites instruct people on how to prepare cooked young milkweed pods. It's that "get back to nature" cuisine nonsense where you forage off the land. The idea is the immature pods are less stringy and without seeds. The toxic glycoside and digoxin chemicals (especially concentrated in the pods) are "apparently destroyed" by frying, boiling, or roasting. But what happens if the pods are undercooked? Time to call the paramedics! According to poison control specialists, this is an insane culinary experience and should not be believed to be safe and healthy. Why would people want to eat milkweed in the first place? I really wonder about people's sanity nowadays.

One final fact comes from the National Library of Medicine website:

*"Detectable serum digoxin concentrations and potential toxicity occur from milkweed consumption. Inadvertent poisoning may occur due to recipes available on the Internet and/or after consuming specialty dishes at restaurants that feature cardiac glycoside-containing plants. The potential hazards of this type of ingestion should be well known to healthcare professionals and the public."*

For the garden, you can plant many species of milkweed—some being hardy natives. In contrast, others are the tender but highly colorful tropical varieties. Be sure to grow a few plants in your garden for the sake of the butterflies. Avoid damaging the plants so no latex oozes onto your fingers or hands and then transfers to your eyes if you rub them. Doesn't that always happen? We must always rub our eyes or scratch our noses when our hands are dirty. Anyway, it doesn't do your eyes any good. If not quickly treated, it could permanently damage the eye to the point of blindness.

# **Atropa – Belladonna; Deadly Nightshade**

**Atropa belladonna**



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Belladonna is a tall and branching perennial herb or shrub native to Europe and the western regions of Asia. It has spread into sporadic areas in North America, usually due to people growing it, and unaffected birds who eat the fruit help spread the numerous seeds far and wide. Reports also indicate deer can eat this plant, as well as cattle and rabbits, but all parts are highly poisonous to humans, our pets, and horses. Go figure!

The species and common name are Italian for “beautiful woman,” but appearances can be deceiving for the entire plant, especially the shiny black fruit and juice is highly poisonous when eaten or when added to a drink. It has always been a popular plant for poisoning people, either fictionally in mystery novels (like those of Agatha Christie), movies, and television shows (like *Midsomer Murders*, *Father Brown*, *CSI* and *NCIS*) or in actual murder cases worldwide. Throughout recorded history, if you wanted to get rid of someone, “slipping a mickey” of the juice into his drink was one way to do it effectively. It is a perfect murdering tool, for the toxicity takes a while to take effect, giving the assassin plenty of time to be elsewhere when tragedy strikes.

Strangely, during the Renaissance, women would add the juice to dilate their eye pupils, making them open more. The idea was to make their eyes appear larger to attract men. Ladies, aren’t you glad you applied eye shadow and liner today instead of using this toxic makeup?

Although not considered a plant for any flower garden, some people think the flowers are pretty even though they know (or should know) that the entire plant is highly toxic. Because it is not a common hazard to be found growing near your home or garden, I will not go into explicit detail but only warn you that seeds dispersed by birds after eating the ripe berries could germinate and grow within any flower or vegetable garden. You never know what plants the neighbors are growing in the neighborhood.

Most accidental poisoning occurs near a vegetable garden since people may believe those berries are edible. They are not. Most healthcare professionals declare this plant one of the deadliest plants to have near your home. Eating a few leaves or berries is strong enough to kill any person.

So, out of curiosity, you are probably asking, “*What happens to an unfortunate person who eats or drinks this plant?*” The answer is a very unpleasant stomach upset begins, followed by increasing muscle paralysis, then vivid hallucinations, confusion, uncontrollable dizziness, intense convulsions, and, finally, death. If a small amount of this plant is

consumed, a person may fall into a deep coma, bypassing the trauma of the above symptoms, but it could still lead to death. Oh dear. It's best to stay far, far away from this "beautiful woman."

This plant is a member of the vast Solanaceae or Nightshade family, including distinguished relations such as the potato, tomato, and eggplant. The ones that we should be concerned about are those specifically named "Nightshade." More information about this highly poisonous group of plants will be acknowledged later in the *Solanum* – Nightshade section.

# Catharanthus – Annual Vinca or Madagascar Periwinkle

*Catharanthus roseus; formerly Vinca rosea*



Although the name is similar, gardeners should not confuse this plant with the perennial, sky-blue flowered groundcover called Vinca or Periwinkle (*Vinca minor*.) Even botanists were once confused and grouped it within the Vinca genus. The flowers may look similar, but both plants are now considered unrelated. Familiar names will always create some confusion between different plants.

This is a unique plant native to the island nation of Madagascar which thrives in hot and dry conditions. Its flowers, a vibrant array of pink, lavender, neon, rosy-red, and white, are a sight to behold. Each blossom

features a distinct white or deeper color center, often called the “eye.” Even white flowers surprise with a vivid, reddish-rose center, adding to the plant’s allure.

This plant is very poisonous if eaten. As the **Wikipedia** website states:

*“C. roseus can be extremely toxic if consumed orally by humans and is cited (under its synonym Vinca rosea) in the Louisiana State Act 159. All parts of the plant are poisonous. On consumption, symptoms consist of mild stomach cramps, cardiac complications, hypotension, systematic paralysis eventually leading to death.”*

Not only is this plant toxic to humans but also to all herbivorous animals. I assume the plant would taste horrible not to allow animals to eat much, but let’s not try to find out.

While known for its toxic properties, this plant also holds the potential for medical breakthroughs. Recent studies have shown that certain chemicals found in the plant, when used individually or in combination, exhibit promising results in combating cancer cells, particularly in cases of leukemia. This discovery opens up a world of possibilities for the medical community, proving that garden flowers like *Catharanthus roseus* can be more than just a pretty flower.

# **Cicuta – Water Hemlock**

## **Conium – Poison Hemlock**

### ***Cicuta douglasii and Conium maculatum***

I combined these plants, for they look the same to most people. They also share a common trait—being extremely toxic when eaten, even by a tiny amount of material.

Some poisonous plants are, generally, never grown in a formal bed or border but accidentally included in a wildflower area. They, unfortunately, resemble other but safe plants like our common edible herbs and vegetables. By now, you can deduct what can and has repeatedly happened with this misidentification.

*Cicuta douglasii* (Water Hemlock) and *Conium maculatum* (Poison Hemlock), described later, are two examples of tragic results when people mistake them for being, of all things, wild and cultivated celery, cilantro, parsnips, parsley, or carrots. Because of this confusion and widespread growth, these two wild-growing plants are unanimously considered the two deadliest plants on the planet. Both are members of the vast Carrot family, which we continuously believe is a genuinely healthful group of plants. But appearances can be deceiving, deceptive, and, ultimately, downright deadly.

*Cicuta*, or the Water Hemlock, native to North America, is described as the American version of Europe's *Conium* or Poison Hemlock. They are not closely related but only share the Hemlock nickname. They look almost identical in flower construction, plant size, leaf, and stem structure. You could think they are doppelgangers of each other. They differ in their witches' brew of toxic chemicals that can cause extreme discomfort, organ failure, nervous system failure, and, ultimately, death.

After this lengthy but vital preliminary background, let's check under the botanical hood to uncover what and why these two plants are so

dangerous.



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*Cicuta douglasii*, shown above, commonly called the Spotted Water Hemlock, grows widely throughout North America's shorelines of rivers, streams, lakes, and ponds. The whole plant resembles a three to six-foot-tall-plus growing carrot plant but more of a resemblance to the common Queen Anne's Lace or Wild Carrot weed. This weedy appearance disqualifies it from being used in a flower bed or border for enjoyment. Still, as an addition to a wildflower or herbal garden, this is where you need to be aware of its dangerous nature.

Its spotted common name is because the smooth hollow stems have a noticeable purple discoloration of spots or streaks. These are two significant noticeable differences with wild carrot plants, which do not have this coloration and have a rough stem texture. One deceptive problem that fools most people is the "almost" similarity of the white

flower clusters shaped like small umbrellas. They are smaller and more plentiful than wild carrot plants.

All parts, from the brownish sap, serrated deep-green leaves, branching roots with swollen tubers filled with more toxic brown sap, white flowers, and plentiful seeds of this plant, are highly poisonous—even if eaten in small amounts—to all people and wild to domestic animals. The primary toxicity involves destroying the central nervous system. Stomach pain develops first, then uncontrollably painful seizures, convulsions, constant dizziness, and unrelentingly vomiting. A quick death is considered a blessing. Avoid handling the entire plant; you can get a sinister but non-fatal, numbing skin reaction.

Accidental fatal poisonings happen occasionally. There is a report of a Maine man who, in 1992, mistakenly dug up a small plant thinking it was wild ginseng. Other accounts have people being seriously or fatally poisoned just by using the fresh hollow stems as drinking straws. Unknowingly, they sipped up some of the toxic sap.



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There is some confusion between *Cicuta douglasii* and *Conium maculatum*, commonly called Poison Hemlock, as shown above. *Conium* is more historically known than *Cicuta*.

Native to a large area of Europe and throughout Mediterranean Sea regions, it can now be found as a weed growing throughout North America, Australia, and New Zealand. As stated earlier, Poison Hemlock looks similar to Water Hemlock, especially like our common weedy plant, Queen Anne's Lace or Wild Carrot (*Daucus carota*.) The plant prefers to grow in exposed soil, such as edges of damp or poorly drained farm fields, but is naturally found in moist woodland borders.

Poison Hemlock has another common name, "The Philosopher's Bane," in reference to the tragic suicide-forced death of Greek philosopher Socrates. The government authorities sentenced him to death because of his radical ideas, speeches, and accusations of "corruption" of male

youth—through his subversive ideas or, as some scholars argue, sexual proclivities. Essentially, he was considered a troublemaker and forced by his own selective method to end his life. He chose a refreshingly brisk cup of hemlock tea. The horrible part of this method was it was not an instant death but a painful, lingering one. He even had time to describe to people what he was physically experiencing and to inject in a few jabs of political insults to the authorities before he died.

Nobody, except possibly Greek “historian” and writer Plato, knows if this is all true about Socrates’s final moments. Plato may have added some fictional dialogue for a better tragic effect. Socrates would have experienced what many other poor, poisoned souls have also suffered: an excruciating and terrifyingly slow, suffocating death.

People have mistakenly used this plant, especially the leaves and the thick single taproot, as a substitute for lettuce and parsley and as a wild form of garden carrot. We need to understand that people throughout the ages have never had enough food and would consider eating anything that had a passing resemblance to “regular food” items. Unfortunately, this would be their last meal.

While walking or hiking near waterways or woodland edges, please resist the urge to collect seeds or transplant small plants to a planned wildflower or water garden site. They may be of these two plants. The same advice is to never order these species seeds from herbal or homeopathic websites or catalogs—if they dare sell them. Hopefully, they never do, but you never know in today’s “anything goes” laissez-faire internet and social media misinformation age.

# Convallaria – Lily of the Valley

## Convallaria majalis



This plant is among the most loved and appreciated groundcover perennials. It is excellent for planting in those problematic, shady spots around your home, for it is long-lived with no pest or disease problems. The medium-sized deep green leaves unfurl in the spring and produce several 'waxy' white, bell-shaped flowers by late spring or early summer. These dangling blossoms release a heavenly, sweet perfume. You miss one of life's pleasures if you have never inhaled this stupendous fragrance.

One way to end your life's pleasure marathon is to eat any part of this plant. Like many of the plants in this ebook, why on earth would you want to is a million-dollar question. Still, it does happen occasionally

with some unsuspecting people. Your major worry is with children and those rambunctious puppies who wish to pick and nibble on any pretty plant. The red “berries” produced during the summer can act as an enticement for any child, so be vigilant when seeing them picking the flower stems.

Even the water in a vase full of picked flowers is poisonous since the submerged stems contaminate the water with extruded toxins. Nobody is going to drink this water, but make sure your thirsty pussy cat does not decide to do so. Kitty will forfeit all its nine lives quickly.

This plant makes all sorts of “make you horribly sick” compounds, especially ones that affect heartbeat functions (cardiac glycosides.) Before having a massive heart attack, you will experience vomiting, excessive diarrhea, and trouble breathing. Fortunately, the plants also form saponins or soap-like chemicals that, when chewed, you will try to spit out the disgusting taste and mushy foam. The lesson to learn here, and throughout this publication, is that Mother Nature is sternly warning you never to eat this and many other flowering plants again.

# Datura – Jimson Weed; Devil’s Trumpet

## Datura stramonium



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As a member of the vast Solanaceae family, this plant has lovely flowers, and all parts of it are highly toxic.

When a plant becomes known as harmful, it creates stories or accounts of what happened to the unfortunate people who suffered from its ill effects. One historical account involves the *Datura* plant, originally nicknamed the Thorny Apple of Peru but also Devil’s Trumpet. The related but larger growing *Brugmansia* has the common name of Angel’s Trumpet. Ironic, isn’t it? Both plants contain highly toxic hallucinogenic chemicals that are fatal in high concentrations but are

beneficial at very low levels. In medium doses, well, that's a different story.

In 1676, a company of British soldiers protected established colonists in Jamestown, Virginia, from Native American uprisings and armed rebellion attacks by dissatisfied colonists led by Nathaniel Bacon. This rebellion eventually became known as Bacon's Rebellion.

While waiting for something exciting to happen by either terrorist group, they ate the young *Datura* leaves as a boiled salad. Here, the reports "go sideways" for another account states they made soup with the flowers and leaves. Another eyewitness states they ground the seeds into a powder as a substitute for tea or coffee. Whichever way they consumed the plant, they all took a wild 11-day "out-of-their-freaking-minds" hallucinogenic "trip" using 1960s slang. Some went naked and acted in simian (as in monkey) comical ways. According to an account by Robert Beverley, a Virginian who either witnessed the event or was told of it, wrote this passage in his journal:

*"[Their actions] was a very pleasant comedy; for they turned natural fools upon it for several days; one would blow up a feather in the air, another would dart straws at it with much fury, and another, stark naked, was sitting up in a corner, like a monkey, grinning and making mows at them; a fourth would fondly kiss, and paw his companions, and sneer in their faces, with a countenance more antics, than any in a Dutch droll."*

For a modern translation and clarification of Bob's account, they acted like flirtatious and agitated chimpanzees worthy of a comedy sketch by *Monty Python's Flying Circus* actors.

Afterward, they all returned to normal but remembered none of their wild 'spaced-out monkey' days. It must have been a rousing and laughter-filled eleven days for those soldiers who did not eat the plants. All joking aside, they were fortunate not to die from eating this plant.

When word spread of this spectacle, the *Datura* plant began being called Jamestown Weed, James-Town Weed, or shortened and later mispronounced as Jimson Weed.

That was a past experience, but a horrific 2006 case was reported by *Pediatrics & Child Health* in 2008 when four children were hospitalized after eating *Datura* flowers.

*The report stated, in part, “All four patients had a decreased level of consciousness measured by the Glasgow Coma Scale, visual hallucinations, dilated pupils, and agitation. The changes in mental status are characteristic of delirium.” Fortunately, the children were quickly treated with medical attention and fully recovered.*

I recommend not adding the *Datura* and *Brugmansia* plants to your garden for three crucial reasons:

- Once again, they are highly poisonous, so beware if you plan to include them in a garden.
- Second, the large flowers and the hand grenade-sized, spiny seed pods are attractive to children and dogs as “play-things.” If you have children anywhere in the area, don’t tempt fate.
- Third, the pods contain hundreds of seeds, ready to repopulate your garden for years to come, long after you tire of them. If you raise these plants, enjoy their scented flowers, but cut off any newly developing seed pods.

Whatever you do—don’t handle these plants! Their toxins can seep into your skin, and although the amount is non-fatal, with constant touching, you begin to experience breathing problems and weird psychological or hallucinogenic effects. Leave these plants alone, or always wear gardening gloves around them.

# Delphinium - Larkspur

**Delphinium elatum; grandiflorum**



These popular annual and perennial plants consistently rank high in popularity with flower gardeners. The primary reason is it has, in part, outstanding bright blue to purple flowers. Unfortunately, *Delphinium*

also ranks astronomically high in toxicity; even consuming a small amount of any part of the plant is fatal, especially to any child or pet.

Apparently, all members of this large family, no matter where the species grows, being a perennial or annual, a hybrid variety or wildflower, contain a cauldron of complex toxins, including various diterpenoid alkaloids (including something verbally sinister called methyl lycaconitine) that drastically affect heart and breathing functions. The seeds and young plants appear to have the most significant amount of these poisonous compounds. As the plant ages and becomes a blooming adult, it has a detectable decrease in these chemicals. Still, it can provide a jolt of horrible life-affecting functions.

Some people are susceptible to experiencing an irritating skin rash when handling young plants, so it is best to don latex or garden gloves when transplanting them into your flower garden. Consider entertaining the thought that if handling the plant can cause unpleasant rashes on your fingers or hands, imagine the grizzly effects on internal organs after eating any part of the plant.

Most Delphiniums are tall-growing and are usually planted at the back of a border. Even though they are in this background location, please clip off (yes, use gloves) the spent flower spikes to prevent excessive seed formation. Again, it must be stressed that their seeds, even a few, are excessively poisonous if accidentally eaten.

# Dicentra – Old-Fashioned Bleeding Heart

*Dicentra spectabilis* or *Lamprocapnos spectabilis*



Once known as *Dicentra* (and still is with us diehard gardeners,) botanists now classify this outstanding spring-blooming, hardy perennial as *Lamprocapnos*. Sorry, but this name sounds like a newly discovered dinosaur fossil or a comical beast from a Dr. Seuss book. No, I will stick with the old name.

Are these beautiful plants with those delightfully dangling “broken heart” flowers poisonous? Yes, sad to say. The main reason for their toxicity is isoquinoline alkaloids. Even the name sounds terrifying, and

you don't want to see its chemical molecular structure, for it will bring back bad memories of your high school chemistry class.

Without going into a significant examination of what ill effects it can have on an animal, let's agree the plant is downright dangerous to eat. There have been plenty of unfortunate reports of dogs dying from ingesting only a small number of leaves or flowers.

There are separate hospital cases in which people have been "accidentally" poisoned by eating Asian restaurant cuisine dishes using dried leaves (and possibly fresh flowers as decorations) in the recipes and preparations. The unfortunate victims began suffering all sorts of neuromuscular, organ, and behavioral disorders and later received immediate medical care. They recovered after a few days.

Reports of wild animals killed by eating this plant are nonexistent. Still, Mother Nature innately advises animals to leave this plant (and others) alone. Humans appear not to have received this message.

# Digitalis – Foxglove

## *Digitalis purpurea and other species*



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Here is another top contender in which a flowering garden plant is ultra-poisonous. And, like some of the other plants, it also can provide life-saving medicine (in low concentrations) for millions of people worldwide. For many people with a heart condition, the prescription drug of digitalis is a lifesaver. Drug companies derive this drug (refined and called Digoxin) from this beautiful, towering, hardy biennial-perennial plant.

Eating any part of the plant is extremely dangerous since the “raw” digitalis glycoside compound will overstimulate the heart muscles,

create horrendous pain, and ultimately cause death — sometimes, quite sudden. Eating a small amount of the plant is like taking a massive overdose of heart medication.

This response will also happen to all animals if they eat any part of the plant. It must taste terrible for animals, and they will spit it out of their mouths and learn to avoid it. As for people, we may have the same reaction, but I would not take a chance to nibble some leaves or flowers.

There is a “plausible” story (that is, people have circulated it around for years) of a man being accidentally poisoned by eating a salad prepared by his children. Within less than an hour, the man was dead. An analysis of his stomach contents during the autopsy determined some leaves mixed with regular lettuce from the vegetable garden. A subsequent investigation revealed a few self-sown, un-blooming foxglove plants were growing within the vegetable garden. The children unknowingly included a few leaves from these plants with the lettuce leaves.

Whether this story is true or not, the most essential action for everyone is to never grow this plant (as well as all other plants listed in this ebook) in or near a vegetable garden. It is also wise to cut off all spent flower spikes (always using garden gloves) to prevent the spread of the abundant seeds that sprout in unwanted areas.

# Euphorbia – Spurge

## *Euphorbia species*



Like the *Asclepias* or Milkweed plants, these beautiful and hardy perennials contain a milky white sap that gushes out of the leaves and stems when injured. This sap also includes the same “make us horribly sick” chemical concoctions that milkweed contains — and probably comprises some other poisons for good measure to make anyone and anything from small pets to wildlife seriously ill.

*Euphorbia* sap can cause our skin to become hyper-photosensitive, so if you accidentally smear the white liquid on your fingers and then on your arm or face, exposure to bright sunlight will develop severe skin blisters. Some people have been reported to have rubbed their eyes with a sap-dipped finger, and their eyelids became painfully inflamed.

Fortunately, the lids protected their eyeballs, but took weeks to heal fully. Obviously, during this time, they had trouble seeing.

The lesson is to wear garden or disposable latex gloves when transplanting and working around this plant.

# Gelsemium – Carolina Yellow Jessamine

## *Gelsemium sempervirens*



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This is a native climbing or rambling vine from the southern areas of the United States to Central America. Most forms of this vine are only hardy to zones 7 and higher.

The beautiful buttercup-yellow ‘funnel’ or trumpet-shaped flowers bloom in early spring and continue into summer. You can even see a few blooms in the fall. The stems will twine around any object and can tower to 12 feet if not cut back. They will also grow like mad as a groundcover. Let’s be more precise—it grows all over the place. It is a toxic chemical factory manufacturing all sorts of neurotoxic alkaloids.

The entire plant is highly poisonous (even the pollen and nectar can sicken bees) by containing hazardous levels of strychnine and other alkaloids, which cause severe muscle paralysis throughout the body, including those muscles used for breathing, and uncontrollable spasms and convulsions. Death is always the end result. Deer and rabbits quickly learn to leave this plant alone, for it will cause them severe gastric upset when consuming a small amount of the plant.

Wildlife may have evolved a partial resistance to small amounts of toxic plants found in their habitat, but the same cannot be said of us. Farmers' livestock are also at a greater risk of death if they eat this plant when no grass or hay is available. Poisonings usually occur during a drought, the winter months, or even if the plant grows near pens or barns.

Eradicating the plant if it grows in your garden or elsewhere nearby is wise.

## Hellebore – Lenten Rose

*Helleborus orientalis* or *Helleborus x hybridus*



While we look outside from our warm homes to a snow-covered garden, bleak with no apparent signs of spring, what we can't observe is what is happening under the snowpack. This perennial (zones 4 to 9) is slowly inching its stems and blossoms up out of the snow. It has evergreen leaves, and some remain—worse for wear—during the winter, but fresh new leaves will also slowly emerge.

Its common name is Lenten Rose, a member of the Buttercup family and not the Rose family. Lenten is also a reference to the Christian season of Lent. This plant blooms during this time — give or take a week or two. While most Northern Hemisphere garden plants are

dormant, this one springs to life even in January and continues to grow and bloom into May.

I can't think why any sane person would eat this horribly-tasting plant. Throughout history, they did, unknowingly realizing this plant can make us seriously ill and guaranteed fatally. Eating any part of the plant (including the roots) will cause uncontrollable diarrhea (being a strong laxative), vomiting, and the development of irregular heartbeat rhythms. Consuming too many plant parts and your heart gives out permanently just before experiencing horrendously painful seizures. Wildlife, including our home-life pets, are also very susceptible to these same actions, but they know better than us humans not to eat this plant.

Ages ago, self-made herbalists prescribed Hellebore dried leaves, flowers, and roots to treat all sorts of human ailments. The prognosis was to dispel disease-causing internal (and infernal) demons out of a patient. If the patient lived and supposedly became healed, hey, great news! If the patient keeled over with massive pain and died, well... sorry, but the demons were too powerful. No wonder medical liability lawsuits were eventually created.

Surprisingly, these herbalists were on to something by using this plant to treat some diseases, but the "dosage" was too high. Modern medical researchers and druggists isolated the chemical called hellebrin, present in some *Helleborus* species, as a medicine to treat cardiovascular disease. In very low concentrations, heartbeat problems can be safely controlled.

Strange but true (and pitifully sad), many years ago, parents forced children to eat these plants to help expel stomach and intestinal worms. The children that didn't die became worm-free. It's a wonder how children survived with such gullible and callous parents.

# Heracleum – Giant Hogweed

## *Heracleum mantegazzianum*



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If you recall, at the beginning of the Introduction, I borrowed a quote from Douglas Adam’s novel stating, “Don’t Panic.” Well, for this section about *Heracleum*, let me revise those words as **“PANIC RIGHT NOW!”**

Suppose the other poisonous plants mentioned in this ebook grow in your garden. In that case, you can count your blessings if you do not have this sinister, horribly overbearing, and aggressive “plant beast-like Triffid” overwhelming your garden or property. No wonder the genus name is associated with the mythological strongman Hercules. Let’s consider it one of Earth’s most dangerous plants.

Several Carrot family members are, apparently, “out to get us.” Well, not really, but reread the *Cicuta* – Water Hemlock and *Conium* – Poison Hemlock paragraphs.

*Heracleum* is also related to carrots, parsley, and celery. It is also poisonous if eaten, but you will not get that far in advance, for it is incredibly toxic externally. Just touching, handling, or brushing against the entire plant with any exposed skin while being in sunlight will cause a horrible caustic rash. It can be so severe that permanent scarring results after the skin eventually heal – after a few agonizing months.

Commonly misidentified as giant Cow Parsley or Queen Anne’s Lace (Wild Carrot) plants, this “carrot on steroids” is a biennial but becomes a long-lived perennial that can grow upward to fifteen feet. It has ultra-large palmately shaped leaves and large, thick green stems, highlighted with purple spots, to support the top weight of huge umbrella-shaped flower inflorescences – just like Queen Anne’s Lace flower clusters.

The plant’s exterior is covered with shards of tiny prickly trichomes or “hairs.” The interior of all parts of the plant, including its massive tap root, contains furanocoumarin chemicals in its sap. When your skin comes into contact with this corrosive sap and exposure to sunlight, hellishly painful blisters soon develop.

These boils or blisters will remain on your skin for months, for healing is slow, and further exposure to sunlight is painful. Scientists have discovered that the sun’s ultraviolet light (responsible for a common sunburn) ignites this chemical’s volatile reaction. The medical term is known as phytophotodermatitis, which is your new word for today. People are also warned never to touch the plant and later rub their eyes. Permanent blindness is a sure bet if the sap gets on or in your eyes.

Giant Hogweed is native to southern areas of Russia and the Caucasus Mountains between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea. It loves to grow near water, such as a stream or pond, but adapts to any area with

fertile, rich soil open to plenty of sunlight. That includes our gardens, parks, and farm fields.

All was fine and dandy until someone, without thinking, decided it would make a great, if not unusual, flower garden addition. It became known in England sometime in the late 19th century and has now permanent residence status. Considered highly invasive, it grows everywhere in the UK. The USA became a recipient in 1917, possibly due to gardeners exchanging seeds or contaminated soil containing seeds imported from elsewhere. It later became noticeably weedy in the New England states and then into the Mid-Atlantic areas. After that, it colonized a few regions in Illinois and somehow leaped across the country to the Pacific Northwestern areas.

A well-grown, mature plant can produce a boatload of seeds each year, dispersing to new areas via the wind, floating down a stream to disembark by a sunny bank in a new location. One interesting theory is they also spread by “hitchhiking” within the tire treads of trucks or car tires if the plants release their seeds by muddy roadsides and later fall off several miles elsewhere.

Eradication of established plantings is very hazardous because of all that caustic sap within each plant. It has been reported that the smoke from burning dried plants can still form blisters on your face and hands. This reminds me that Poison Ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) can also do this via the smoke of burning plants.

Even chemical control with herbicides has limited results, for the thick root can survive and reestablish new growth. Seeds can remain dormant in the soil for over five years. New plants will regrow from those germinated seeds if an established colony is destroyed.

If you should find this botanical monster anywhere near your home or garden, contact your county agricultural office to report your discovery and ask for advice on how to kill it safely. Whatever you do, never touch any part of it with your hands or exposed feet—or suffer the painful and disfiguring results.

# **Hippomane – Manchineel; Tree of Death; Beach Apple**

## **Hippomane mancinella**



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When I composed this section, there was a foot of snow outside with a temperature of 5 degrees Fahrenheit and a doom and gloom windchill factor close to that of the moon's dark side. If it's winter, then all thoughts turn to places of abundant sunshine, blue skies, and warm, white sandy tropical beaches.

Speaking of which, now is the time to take a break from all the terrible health symptoms described in this ebook and look for a tranquil spot

far away from the thoughts of killer garden plants. Let's go to the tropics right now! No killer plants are found there.

Oh damn, there is, at least, one. It's called Manchineel, also known as (cue eerie music) "The Tree of Death." This tree towers to a height of nearly 50 feet and belongs to the Euphorbia family (explained earlier). Surprisingly, it is related to the ever-popular Christmas poinsettia plant. You will not have a Merry Christmas with this tree.

The good news is that you will not have to worry about having this tropical tree grow in your gardens or lawn—what a relief! The bad news is that it will drastically spoil your Caribbean vacation if you think it is an apple tree. More about that shortly, but you need to understand some facts about this plant that many botanists consider the world's most dangerous tree (if not plant) ever encountered.

Native to the Caribbean islands, it also grows in northern coastal acreage throughout Central and South America and into the southernmost coastal properties of Florida. It is listed as an endangered species (borderline extinction) because of habitat loss, such as excessive beachfront development. That may be a blessing, for you do not want an excessively toxic apple-like tree dropping its acid fruit on the sandy beaches populated with millions of sunbathers.

The reason for declaring it so dangerous is that every part of this tree exudes a caustic and toxic sap that forms horribly disfiguring and intensely painful blisters on exposed skin. The sap will instantly burn your mouth if you bite into the fruit, which resembles small greenish-yellow apples. Suppose you manage to swallow some of this fruit. In that case, your throat becomes cauterized, inflammation rapidly develops, and choking results in death. Shipwrecked sailors, desperate for any juicy fruit for survival, experienced this sad and prolonged fate.

Today, tourists are warned never to touch this tree or sink their teeth into that fragrant ripe apple floating in the water or washing via the waves onto the sandy beaches. Some popular locations post extreme danger warning signs along beaches or next to the trees. The native population calls this tree "manzanilla de la muerte," meaning "little

apple of death.” You will think about this name whenever you eat a Granny Smith apple for lunch. As usual, some know-it-alls disobey these dire warnings and pay a horrible price for their stupidity.

This tree is even scarier (hard to imagine, but true) because the white sap contains the main toxin called phorbol. This substance is water-soluble, and it is said that if you stand under a tree while it is raining, the raindrops will cause a painful caustic burn on your exposed skin. Talk about “acid rain” to the max. Open up the umbrellas — NOW!

An unsubstantiated claim says that burning the non-dried wood carries the sap molecules in with the smoke. Exposure to the smoke will burn your skin and eyes, resulting in temporary to permanent blindness.

If you vacation in the tropics, make sure to never encounter this horrible tree or its fruit. And as for sowing a few seeds to develop a brag about tropical tree for your home — FORGET IT!

# Laburnum – Golden Chain Tree

## Laburnum x watereri



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Considered excellent for landscaping, this fast-growing tree resembles wisteria but has cascading clusters of brilliant yellow pea-like blossoms. Native to Europe, it is hardy from zones 5 to 7 and blooms heavily in the late spring. Hey, it sounds ideal. Well, think again – please.

The tree may look fabulous while blooming, but afterward, when the blossoms fade and drop to cover the ground, the surrounding area looks like hell.

Every part of this tree is excessively toxic, especially the bark, seed pods, and seeds. In late spring to early summer, the falling seed pods

contain masses of bean-like seeds that can attract children's and pets' attention to eat. Dogs also get poisoned by chewing and gnawing on branches. The symptoms of poisoning begin with excessive vomiting, leading to violent convulsions, unconsciousness, and death eventually results. For children and pets — that process is accelerated.

Some British authorities speculate that this tree provides the most cases of poisoning compared to any other plant in Great Britain. That may be an exaggeration, but there have been reports of mass poisonings of British school children a few years ago who played in seed pod-covered playgrounds located under these trees. Hospitals could not identify what caused their poisoning until they pumped the children's stomachs. The contents contained, in part, this tree's seeds.

Under immediate treatment, the children recovered, having learned never to eat unknown seeds again. They were fortunate, but what if no hospitals were nearby? How many people have mysteriously been poisoned by these trees over time?

# Lathyrus – Sweet Pea

**Lathyrus odorata; sativus**



Now we come to where a common name can get people into the hospital emergency room for severe gastric and neurological distress or eventually into the city or county morgue. Just because this plant is called a sweet pea does not mean it is a substitute for English or snow peas (*Pisum sativum*) served for dinner. And yet, this has happened to people for ages, thinking this wonderfully fragrant vine or groundcover can be used as a substitute for the real McCoy of garden peas. Not so.

Unlike most other plants described in the ebook that can show immediate poisoning symptoms, eating all *Lathyrus* species flowers – especially the seeds – does not exhibit any noticeable symptoms unless eaten regularly for an extended time. Well, you may think they are not

so worrisome after all. But that is deceiving. Accidental or deliberate eating of a few cooked seeds does not result in immediate concern, but having a habitual meal of them will lead to permanent neurological disorders.

The toxin produced, called lathrogens, when digested in quantity, causes increased physical paralysis, including difficulty in breathing and periodic convulsions and seizures. You may wonder who would eat enough of these seeds to develop such symptoms, but it does happen. Many people in some regions of the world, especially in the Middle East, northern Africa, India, parts of Europe, and Asia, have protein deficiency in their daily dietary requirements and resort to eating these high-protein seeds.

Over a short time, the above symptoms develop and get worse. Fortunately, if people soon stop eating these seeds, they will eventually revert back to normal. Otherwise, when consumed regularly, they don't recover and get worse to the point of widespread organ and nervous system failure with a guarantee of death.

Compared to the other plants in this publication, let's not worry about growing these vines but enjoy their flowers.

# Narcissus – Daffodils

## *Narcissus* species and varieties



Their beauty inspired William Wordsworth to compose a memorable poem when he saw a host of golden daffodils swaying in a breeze. He may not have known that the whole plant is poisonous with alkaloids and other nasty “oids” and “amines.” The main culprit for accidental poisonings is eating the bulbs. Throughout history, people have confused daffodil bulbs with onion bulbs. Apparently, they have lost their sense of smell. How do you not notice the smell of an onion bulb?

Although not life-threatening, eating one bulb will cause massive stomach distress lasting for a few days. It will be life-threatening if you binge on eating several bulbs at one time.

To understand what happens if you eat not the bulbs but the above-ground plants, take a lesson on what can happen with deer and possibly rabbits. They are not digging up bulbs to gnaw on, but eating the leaves, stems, and flowers can cause them to experience super-duper tummy aches. No one has seen them do so (or they relate to us their alarming ailments). Still, I suspect the taste is sickening once they bite the plant and consume no more. If they were to take a mouthful and tolerate the flavor, the sticky, gummy gel of the sap is enough to make any deer gag-like-mad. How would Mr. Wordsworth have composed a poem about that?

The next time you pick a daffodil, feel the exuded thickened sap at the injured end of the stem. Now, imagine what that would feel like in your mouth. Enough said, wouldn't you agree? Just enjoy viewing those hosts of lovely wind-swayed daffodils next spring. You'll feel fit as a fiddle by doing so.

There is also a health advisory with a few other types of Narcissus, only not life-threatening but for developing a debilitating headache in which you feel death would be ideal. These are the familiar indoor pot-grown **Paperwhite** varieties that are especially popular during Christmas. They produce stems loaded with several clusters of small white to yellow blossoms, which exude a stench-like odor so strong that some people develop migraine-like headaches if they stay in a room too long with these plants. Nausea, double vision, and, sometimes, unconsciousness results in some ultra-sensitive people.

Then, you have other people who love that "unique perfume." I am not of this league of admirers. For me, the flowers smell like hell and, when trapped near them, make me desperately hold back the unpleasant desire to puke my entire innards out. I could compose a Wordsworthian-like poem about that, but I better not.

# Nerium – Oleander

## Nerium oleander



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Highly valued in warmer climate garden locations of the world, especially across the southern areas of the United States and Europe, this evergreen landscape shrub provides a grand display of hundreds (well, thousands from older plants) of highly fragrant, colorful flowers from late spring until midsummer. Sounds ideal, doesn't it? Not so fast.

The whole plant, including the seeds, is a toxic nightmare of various poisonous chemicals (including nature's chief ingredient, cardiac glycosides) that, when ingested with as few as a couple of leaves or blossoms, will kill you within an hour or two. In between this period,

the unlucky recipient will experience ultra-severe gastric distress, constant vomiting, massive seizures, and, ultimately, a fatal heart attack. Even the sap is toxic if it comes into contact with your skin. It will not kill you but will make you feel miserable for a time.

If you are considering growing this plant, please don't — even if you happen to live in Galveston, Texas. It is nicknamed Oleander City since the entire area is ideal for cultivating the plant. It thrives throughout the island, even surviving sporadic hurricanes, and has become so beloved by the residents that it holds an annual International Oleander Festival sponsored by the International Oleander Society each spring, showcasing many colorful and rare varieties. Like any festival, it attracts hordes of visitors—maybe not so much for viewing the flowers—but for the music venues and the smorgasbord offerings from food vendors.

To be upfront, I have never attended this festival, and perhaps I am wrong (and willing to admit it), but strolling around a park with billions of Oleander blossoms and eating hotdogs, fried chicken, or pizza while trying to corral non-obedient children running wildly amongst the Oleander bushes is something I would be really concerned about. What could possibly go wrong?

I am being too harsh; after all, there have been no news reports of massive Oleander poisonings occurring in all these years since 1921 of the festival. No one likes to read or hear warnings about attending what any festival should be about — music, food, and fun. Still, it is better to be safe than sorry, especially when being near all these plants.

# Ricinus – Castor Oil Plant; Castor Bean Plant

**Ricinus communis**



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There is one plant I refuse to grow and have yet to write about in my many ebooks (until now, by spreading the warning never to grow it). After learning more about this plant, I plan never to be near it. I constantly wonder why gardeners still grow it in their gardens.

People have known the plant to be highly poisonous for generations. Even the *2007 Guinness Book of World Records* declared it the most toxic plant in the world. This plant, commonly called Caster Oil Plant, is poisonous but safe when the seeds are processed in industrial or

medicinal applications. Go figure! But, like many other plants listed as deadly, they also have some life-saving value.

Native to all around the Mediterranean Sea area, this plant can grow as a woody tree. Still, in most other less warm locations, it develops as a tender, shrubby perennial or, most often, as a gigantic annual. Because of its “tropical-looking” attractiveness, people, over the ages, have planted it in their gardens. Unfortunately, the plants have spread to the wild and have become invasive, especially in warmer climates worldwide. For example, in the southwestern United States, wild-grown invasive plants are usually found in moist, well-drained soils in disturbed areas, especially on the edges of farm fields or housing construction sites.

People seem to love these plants for their large stems and leaves, usually green, but with “more attractive” types being bronze-red. Several clusters of not-showy, “naked” petal-less flowers lie within the plant, eventually forming spiny, bright red seed pods.

When ripe, these pods split open and release half-inch bean-shaped seeds displaying “artistic” mosaic splotches of brown, black, reddish-yellow, or white colors. Most of their weight contains an oil that has, throughout history, transformed into all sorts of materials—originally as fuel for lamps, then as ingredients in soap, paints, ink, and early plastics. Industries also altered the oil to form lubricants and later into medicinal applications like a “colon lubricant” to ease constipation. Many people report that the taste of this oil is “god-awful.” I’ll take their word for it.

Well, all of this is fine and dandy if the seeds are “safely refurbished” (for want of a better descriptive term). The entire plant, especially the raw seeds or “beans,” contains an ultra-potent toxin called ricin. It is so hellishly poisonous that one comparative estimate states it is 6,000 times more potent than an equal weight of cyanide. How authorities determine that value is questionable, but not the result — a quick death.

Ingesting a couple of whole or powdered seeds can kill an adult, while lesser amounts will cause incredible abdominal pain, excessive vomiting, and recurring convulsions and seizures. Death may come later.

A troubling thought occurs: What happens with all the seeds developed over a growing season? What becomes of them? My concern is the animals, including birds, that eat these seeds. Do they die from eating a seed or two? Based on limited research, yes, they do. Since we do not find lifeless or near-dead bodies littering our flower beds, there are no reliable statistics on wildlife fatalities.

One startling report happened in the fall and winter months of 1969 to 1971 in the Texas panhandle regions when several thousand ducks became poisoned and died after eating the seeds from these invasive plants. Imagine deer, wild turkeys, and geese eating these seeds. Most likely, they have, and died, maybe in great numbers, with no one noticing—or caring. If it can happen in your garden, it can occur in the wild just as easily.

Of all the plants that you can raise in your flower beds or borders, please, never grow this horrible one.

## Solanum – Nightshade

*Solanum nigrum; americanum; dulcamara; ptycanthum, and more!*



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Now, we come to a large ensemble of closely related plants, including some of our famous and popular eating vegetables and fruits, such as potatoes, tomatoes, and eggplant (aubergine). Most of these vegetable (and fruit) plants are safe to eat except in their raw or green-fruited stage and their leaves. Potato tubers (spuds) are safe only when kept in darkness for prolonged periods.

*Solanum* is a large family that has varying degrees of toxicity. Another famous, highly poisonous relation is *Atropa belladonna* or Belladonna,

described earlier. This particular group is called nightshades for some obscure reason. Still, all contain some really nasty alkaloid chemicals called solanine and scopolamine. Symptoms of ingesting too much of either chemical include severe stomach or abdominal pain, recurring vomiting, and excessive diarrhea, with the possibility of death in some individuals, especially in children and pets. Depending on the species, the plants can be annual, perennial, or tender shrubs based on climate and location.

The ripe fruit of these plants looks like cherry tomatoes, which is why most poisonings are caused by accidental identification. All species are dangerous in their leaves and green-fruit stages. Still, the ripe fruit has differing toxicity—from moderately safe to terribly hazardous—depending on how much fruit was eaten. Ripe fruit varies in color and size from species to species. Some are shiny black, red, yellow, or orange. Please remember that the color of the fruit in this family does not mean it is safe to eat.

It will take several pages to describe all these species, but I can narrow down one of their common similarities—they all have the potential to be found in or near your vegetable garden. Most have spread worldwide via seed companies and birds who eat the fruit (it's safe for them) and deposit the seeds elsewhere from their fecal droppings. You may have seen the plants growing as weeds outside a woodland, by the edge of a pond or lake, within a disturbed soil area such as farmland or pastures, or outside a construction site.

The flowers of this family are remarkably similar and familiar if you plant tomatoes, potatoes, and eggplants. They form in clusters with star-shaped, yellow, white, blue, or purple petals with extended and partially fused bright yellow anthers.

The plants range from a foot tall to well over three feet and are bushy. Some have sharp thorns or prickles on their solid green or purplish stems and leaves. Injuries from them are slow to heal because of the toxic chemicals.

# Taxus – Yew Tree

## *Taxus baccata*



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This large, ultra-hardy, coniferous, evergreen shrub or tree has always been famous for landscaping. You can trim it for any purpose, such as a topiary or long-lasting hedge. Some more prominent locations, such as estates, have even created difficult-to-navigate mazes. Older places such as cemeteries (or old churchyards in Great Britain) have let the plant become what it was associated to become—a large spreading tree.

However, it's crucial to be aware of the dark side of this tree. All parts of the Yew, including the bright red, fleshy fruit or berries called arils, and especially the seeds, are highly toxic. Each part contains various levels

of the deadly taxine alkaloid chemicals. The seeds are highly poisonous, so it is essential never to ingest them. If consumed, the toxic symptoms can rapidly develop, including difficulty breathing, unrelenting dizziness, muscle convulsions, rapid heartbeats, and vomiting.

Strangely, wild animals (mammals and birds) can eat the fruit (along with the seeds) without ill effects. But that only applies if they do not chew the seeds. The seeds are highly toxic, but unchewed seeds pass through the digestive system with no harmful effects. They expel them later via their fecal droppings.

Despite its toxicity, the Yew tree also holds a potential life-saving ability. The taxine alkaloid chemicals it contains have shown promise in controlling or even curing various forms of cancer. Researchers have processed large quantities of Yew tree leaves and bark to synthesize anti-cancer drugs like Taxol®.

There are ongoing studies to create synthetic (but safe) versions of these toxic chemicals. Their aim is to make more anti-cancer medications readily available and prevent the destruction of tens of thousands of Yew trees each year. It's important to note that Yew trees are slow-growing and have limited adult populations.

# Plants To Make You Feel Sick

Most of the following plants are relatively safe to grow in your garden but still have semi-toxic chemicals that will make you sick as a dog if eaten. Still, the main idea is to refrain from eating any part of the plants. Most people will never consider doing so, but cases of people (especially children) have been recorded.

There are plenty of flower garden plants, but the following are more notorious representatives to make you gut-wrenchingly ill. Many authorities feel you would have to eat a hefty number of leaves and flowers to make you visit the nearest hospital's emergency room. The saving grace is that any part of these plants (and many more not listed) tastes absolutely horrible, and any reasonable person would not get past eating a tiny mouthful.

Why bring up this subject of potential poisonous plants that no one can eat more than one bite? People have eaten more than they should and experienced some unpleasant side effects. They did it deliberately or (somehow) accidentally. The lesson is to only see and smell the following plants and never make them into a salad.

# Cannabis – Marijuana

## Cannabis sativa



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I know what you are thinking. Grow “pot” in the flower garden? Well, not really, for that may be illegal in many areas, but some people will try to do so. Where legal, you can grow it anywhere: in the house, garden, or greenhouse.

The usual method, at least in the past, is to grow it in hidden areas of basements using high-tech growing techniques such as hydroponics, fans, and high-intensity grow light lamps. Times are changing, and home flower and vegetable gardens will probably become the place to grow this plant alongside petunias and tomatoes.

What once was an unlawful plant to grow, sell, smoke, or eat has, over the years and throughout several areas of the world, become a semi-lawful and semi-healthy botanical substance. But make no mistake, it possesses toxic substances that can damage the body and mind of any person.

The debate on whether cannabis is harmful or beneficial to health continues depending on current public and political attitudes and legalities. Once considered a prison sentence for possessing this fresh or dried plant, it is slowly being transformed into a home-based processing activity. My oh my, times have certainly changed—especially over the past few years. What once was down is now up, or in this case, what once was low is now a legal “high.”

Cannabis has proven to be a medicinal substance that helps to potentially cure and control various health afflictions and maladies. But like other plants listed in this ebook, cannabis contains harmful chemical compounds that, if consumed too much, will have a detrimental effect on the body and, especially, the mind. For our purposes here, let’s examine the destructive effects of excessive smoking or adding it to food.

Without going into the medical explanations of what a particular potent chemical does, the overall effect is a significant behavioral transformation. You develop a “high” of excessive euphoria, an overstimulation of all senses, and altered states of mind and memory. The constant question always asked is, *“Is marijuana really safe to use?”* The answer depends on who is asking and who is using it.

An overdose of marijuana figuratively short-circuits the brain and behavioral functions and actions. In a literal sense, brain damage can develop over prolonged exposure. The toxic overload damage can sometimes extend into the body, causing damage to various organ systems. Pregnant women should avoid smoking (including inhaling secondhand smoke), for severe birth defects will occur in the developing fetus.

Most cannabis is dried to make cigarettes but can also be added as an ingredient to food items, especially candy, cookies, and other baked items. I remember television sitcom shows (especially those in the 1970s) that had the main characters acting comically “loopy” after accidentally eating chocolate brownies laced with marijuana. I do not know if this can happen suddenly. Still, disastrous results will occur if children and pets eat these adulterated adult “treats.”

It has happened in areas where “pot growing” is legal, and children overdose on its trippy-intoxicating compounds after eating “mommy and daddy’s special candy.” Their surprised parents admit them to hospital emergency rooms when they become incoherent, dizzy, have difficulty breathing, and have other weird physical and mental problems. Dogs also discover the “treats” and eat heartily, then succumb—sometimes fatally—to the drug’s effects.

Personally, I don’t care what adults do, but having any child (or pet) undergo such a traumatic accidental poisoning with this plant is blatantly criminal.

# Ipomoea – Morning-glory

*Ipomoea nil* or *Ipomoea x imperialis*



Native to Mexico and Central America, our ordinary morning glory has a rich history but not as being colorful garden vines. This large family shares a common trait of having white latex-like sap. Like most other latex sap-containing plants, it contains a witch's brew of toxic chemicals. Although not excessively poisonous, unless you eat plenty of leaves and flowers, your health problems can become frightening even by eating a few plant parts. Excessive vomiting and uncontrollable diarrhea are what is in store for you.

Eating the seeds is the most problematic and toxic, for they contain concentrated amounts of chemicals that are similar to LSD. While both ends of your body expel their respective contents, an electrical storm of

vicious hallucinations racks your brain. If your heart withstands all this abuse, count yourself very lucky.

The Aztec culture of Mexico held a unique belief about morning glory seeds. They saw them as a means to communicate with their Sun God, a form of 'trippy' drug with psychedelic and 'out of this world' visionary applications. This cultural significance gave the plant a special honor in their religious observances.

Later, morning glories made their way to China but were also not grown for the colorful flowers but, again, for the seeds. People valued them more for their medicinal properties, including as a laxative. OK. They enjoyed their morning glories more for the glory of staying "regular." Quickly moving right along....

# **Nicotiana—Flowering or Ornamental Tobacco**

**Nicotiana x sanderae; Nicotiana alata,  
Nicotiana sylvestris**



Research has proven that long-term smoking and chewing tobacco products will eventually cause cancer. For cigarettes and cigars, lung cancer will develop, while chewing tobacco leads to oral cancer. It is no wonder cancer will develop, even if at a slow pace since all tobacco species contain highly toxic nicotine chemicals. These toxins will cause severe and near-fatal reactions, quickly affecting the central nervous system.

Growing the popular Ornamental Tobacco plants will only harm you if you decide to eat some leaves. I find it implausible for anyone to do so for one large leaf reportedly tastes horrible. According to worldwide reports, some individuals consumed some leaves, resulting in severe heart problems and the need for immediate hospital care. Were there fatalities? That is unknown. Enjoy the flowers, but never make a salad of them or the leaves.

# **Phytolacca – American Pokeweed; Inkberry Bush**

**Phytolacca americana**



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This plant, which can reach up to ten feet in height, is native to most of the continental USA, and people usually consider it a weed. In early summer, it develops thick roots, reddish stems, large green leaves, and clusters of tiny, pinkish-white flowers. By fall, grape-sized, juicy black berries dangle from the stems.

The juice resembles dark purple-black ink, which children used (maybe still do) as “play ink” for makeshift quill writing pens. I remember dipping the sharpened end of a discarded goose or hawk’s wing feather

into the crushed berries and scribbling secret notes on paper. Alas, an Agent 007 I was not, but the imaginative intrigue was compelling to save the neighborhood from evil adversaries.

The juice has some toxicity, but the roots and leaves have the most significant amount of poison. One strange association is cooking the smaller young leaves to create an old Southern Appalachian and Deep South dish called “poke salad” or “poke sallet” for a New Orleans flair. People there have long known the poisonous nature of the leaves, but that did not deter them from cooking and eating this questionable dish.

To eliminate the toxins (let’s all cross our fingers now), the leaves need to boil in water for five minutes, then drained and boiled again for another five minutes. Some chefs recommend an extra third boil for good measure. They’re smart. How this double or triple boiling was determined to leach away the poisons is anyone’s guess. It raises the question of how many people got sick before they refined this process.

One crucial determination was never to use older leaves, which contain excessive amounts of poisonous compounds. These toxins produce severe gastrointestinal cramps and uncontrollable vomiting. There have been reports of death, but only in a few cases. How many unreported cases over several years is another matter.

After boiling them repeatedly, people traditionally sauté the cooked leaves with bacon grease and season them with crisp bacon pieces, salt, pepper, or other spices. You could also add the leaves to scrambled eggs.

Don’t harshly judge the poor folks, especially during the Great Depression, who relied on culinary imagination to create something nutritious from commonly available weeds. Need a dessert? You can bake the pokeberries to make a toxin-free pie. Or so people assume. It sounds intriguing, but I’ll stick with a yummy Marie Callender® cherry pie any day.

# Saponaria – Bouncing Bet, Soapwort

## *Saponaria officinalis*



This perennial plant is a European wildflower related to the Dianthus or carnation family. It is a terrific bloomer with fragrant rosy pink or snow white single or double petals. This plant is relatively safe compared to several other garden plants that contain potentially fatal cocktails of toxic compounds and elixirs.

The only potentially dangerous factor is the leaves contain saponin chemicals that, in combination with water (like saliva) and an agitation action (like chewing or eating), form gobs of choking soapsuds. You can safely discover this process when you need a quick hand wash: pluck a few leaves, crunch them up, add a little water, and presto—instant hand soap.

The Latin name of 'Saponaria' means 'relating to soap' or 'soap making.' Museums did (and some still do) use the leaves to produce soap suds for washing delicate or irreplaceable fabric material.

I doubt anyone would continue chewing on the leaves. Who would want soap suds in their mouth? Don't worry too much about having this unusual plant in any garden. Enjoy the flower's beautiful fragrance and have some fun making instant hand soap.

# Conclusion

By now, you may have thought, “*Who on earth would be so foolish to eat these poisonous plants?*” Fortunately, but unfortunately for them, few people. But accidents can happen and have happened, usually involving unsuspecting adults, children, and pets, who are vulnerable to these dangers.

My concern about writing this ebook was that you may think I am insane by repeatedly giving dire warnings, not unlike, “*This plant is going to kill you!*” I reluctantly agree, so go ahead and criticize my incessant alarm. My true intent is to educate you on those plants that can be potentially fatal if accidentally eaten—even by ingesting a small amount of the plant.

Should we never grow these plants in a flower garden? Based on their high level of toxicity, I will say a reluctant ‘yes.’ They are beautiful but can pose a significant health risk.

I regularly visit a favorite flower nursery. Last year, I discovered some of the above-listed plants offered for sale did not have a warning about their dangerous toxic properties. Talking to an employee, I explained my concerns. One example I explicitly warned about was the *Aconitum* or Wolfsbane perennial plant and its deadly properties. The employee listened, but he may have thought I was “one of those troublemaking customers.” He quickly shuffled me off, reassuring me that he would look into placing a written warning about the plant. Two weeks later on a return visit, no warnings to alert customers of the toxic properties were posted. So be it. I tried.

To summarize the lessons to be learned from this ebook, I recommend the following conditions or protocols concerning the above-listed plants if grown in a flower garden:

- Locate them away from children’s and pets’ easy access. Plant them in the back of borders or areas away from where children and pets play. For the best safety, consider not growing these plants. The flowers may be pretty, but is it

worth the worry? Several less harmful and beautiful flowers are available to plant in any bed or border.

- Grow in trays, containers, or outdoor patches of “cat grass” – actually, sown wheat or oat seeds – for your dog or cat to eat the blades and later vomit. This is an innate action to rid swallowed fur or inedible food from their stomachs. Many seed catalogs and online pet supply businesses provide seed packets of these accessible and quick-growing grasses.
- Never situate a flower garden next to a vegetable garden. Some toxic plant leaves can be confused with leafy salad greens.
- Avoid adding flower petals to food items like salads. Non-gardeners and children may develop a false sense that any flower or plant parts can be added to food preparation. Teach children to select plants only offered in grocery stores.
- Please advise employees in garden centers and nurseries to include warnings about planting (and handling) the toxic plants listed earlier. Tell the center administrators or owners they will help save lives and show their nursery business ensures customer safety.
- Finally, ensure the local poison control contact number is recorded on your cell or landline phone. Hopefully, you never have to call, but it pays to be prepared for unexpected emergencies. There are plenty of plants, insecticides, herbicides, fungicides, fertilizers, and cleaning supplies that can make any great day suddenly turn bad. Always compose and have on hand an itemized list of all household and outdoor chemicals, including the plants grown in your home and garden. Being unaware of what is available to cause a known or possible poisoning guarantees a horrible fate for an unfortunate victim.

Do you remember the children’s story of Chicken Little, who had an acorn fall on his head and frantically warned other chickens that the sky was falling? Silly bird. I may have acted “somewhat” like Chicken Little when writing this ebook. Silly me?

Please consider those other chickens may have looked upward to see if the sky was actually falling. I hope I have encouraged you to be more aware of what dangerously grows (or you plan to grow) in your flower garden. Learning that potentially fatal chemicals flow within those leaves and colorful petals is essential for ensuring your safety and those of innocent and beloved family members.

# Thank you for reading this ebook

Many more toxic to potentially deadly flowering plants are grown in gardens or found in the wild. Whether you are a long-time or new gardener, treat all plants cautiously, especially when children and pets are in the area.

I hope this publication has made you aware of those garden and wildflower plants that can easily be purchased, grown, or misidentified and have toxic properties capable of producing severe illness or potential lethality.

Please visit my author website, <https://gedwinvarner.com> concerning my other gardening ebooks and contact information.

## **About the Author**

G. Edwin Varner grew up on a farm, helping his father in the crop fields and assisting his mother in the flower and vegetable gardens. This experience and learning led him to receive a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology with a minor in Botany.

He successfully owned and operated a fragrant flower mail-order nursery for twenty years. Unlike most mail-order nurseries publishing colorful but expensive pictorial catalogs, his frugal catalog extensively described the flowers he grew. He once said, "I write a thousand words worth a picture in my catalogs." Today, he has the same style of writing (thankfully with fewer words) through a variety of enjoyable and informative ebooks. This time, the ebooks include color photos of each flower.

He encourages you to cultivate something unique and beautiful in your gardens. His motto is "Read about it, see it, grow it, and enjoy it!"

G. Edwin Varner lives in a rural area of northeastern Ohio, USA.