

# The Sinister Garden

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## The dark side of nature

Nature has provided us with an abundance of food, useful products and beauty from plants, fruits and flowers. However, your garden may harbor plants of deadly charm.

Some of the most poisonous plants are grown in our own home landscapes, perhaps unbeknownst to you. There are hundreds of species of plants that, if ingested, can cause violent illness or even death. You can protect your family and others by learning to identify which plants or parts of plants are harmful.

Most people have heard of poison ivy or sumac, but strictly speaking, these aren't really poisonous. They contain no poisonous agent; rather they are "allergens," because not everyone is allergic to them. Many plants fall into this category.

"Poisonous" plants actually contain toxic substances that, when contacting the skin or being absorbed by the body, cause direct harm to the human system (e.g., poisonous saps and juices that can sear the skin).

However, most poisonous plants must be ingested to cause adverse effects. All parts of some plants (such as laurel, rhododendron, yew and aconitum) are harmful while only certain parts of others cause harm. Even some of our most edible plants have certain toxic parts, for example, the leaves of potatoes, tomatoes, rhubarb, eggplant and cherry trees.

Quite often the seeds or bulbs of plants cause a great deal of trouble. Daffodil and hyacinth bulbs contain deadly poisons, as do the seeds of daphne and sweet pea, and the pit or stone of many kinds of fruit like peach or apricot.

Castor beans contain the very powerful poison, ricin. Do not plant it where there may be children. Two seeds could kill a child. Do you know which plant has caused the most human deaths? (The answer is at the end of the article.)

With some exceptions, ingestion of a large amount of most plants is usually required to cause poisoning in humans. However, it takes less to harm children or persons with weak immune systems. Children tend to be very curious and are apt to experiment with berries, roots, leaves and flowers.

Some folks insist on experimenting with wild plants and berries for use as food, in "teas" and in various homeopathic medicines. This is very risky unless their usage is based on authoritative, scientifically researched information— not legends or folklore.



Hydrangeas are landscape staples in this area. The amygdalin in the flowers combines in the body to create cyanide – so, look but don't taste. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardener.*

Some practical rules are:

1. Never eat any part of an unknown plant.
2. Eat only properly prepared foods from well-known sources.
3. Never chew on jewelry made from imported seeds or beans. (Example: The tiny bean seed of the rosary pea is among the most poisonous in the world, chemically related to snake venom. Chewing on less than one seed can be fatal. Yet they are used in jewelry for tourists.)
4. Never use anything prepared from nature as a "tea" or medicine.
5. Learn to identify the poisonous plants in your area.
6. Firmly impress these rules on children.

Poisonous plants can cause a variety of symptoms depending on the toxic substance in the plant. Certain chemicals cause irritation of the mouth and throat, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Others, such as the oxalates found in rhubarb leaves, cause intense pain and swelling of the mouth, tongue, throat, breathing and speaking difficulty, vomiting, diarrhea and sometimes death.

The amygdalin found in cherry tree twigs and bark, elderberry leaves, cotoneaster berries and hydrangea flowers combines in the body to form cyanide. The symptoms are often delayed, and can be followed by vomiting, severe pain, paralysis, unconsciousness and even death.



Morning glory (left) and calla lily (right) are other common plants in Pacific Northwest gardens that contain toxins. *Photos by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardener.*

The calla lily is a common landscape in the Pacific Nor

Several plants, such as foxgloves and lily of the valley, contain cardiac glycosides that can cause irregular heart beat, vision changes, drowsiness and vomiting. The pyrethrum extracted from the member of the chrysanthemum family is a very deadly organic insecticide. These are just a few of the poisonous chemicals found in landscape plants; there are many others.

Common weeds may also surprise you. Our ever-present buttercup, if eaten in large amounts, can cause convulsions.

A drink made from poison hemlock (common all over Skagit County) is said to have killed the Greek philosopher, Socrates. This plant grows in damp areas and has large umbel-shaped flowers with hollow, hairless, purple-spotted stems. All parts of the plant are poisonous. Learn to recognize it and get rid of it immediately.

Other common weeds or landscape plants used in Pacific Northwest gardens that contain toxins include azalea, boxwood, deadly nightshade, calla lily, carnation, cyclamen, English holly, golden chain, hellebore, horse chestnut, iris, juniper, larkspur, mountain laurel, morning glory, some ivy, privet, violet and wisteria.

Some plants can cause eye irritation, even blindness, when parts of them are eaten or when their sap or smoke from a burned plant gets into your eye.

Other plants cause harm by their phototoxicity. They harness the sun to do their damage, using sap that burns and blisters the skin when exposed to light. The oils of citrus fruits can also trigger a painful reaction. Have you ever made a pomander ball by sticking whole cloves into an orange or lime with your bare hands? Not recommended.

Enjoy your garden and its plants, and at the same time learn to appreciate this bounty with due respect and common sense.

And the plant that has caused the most human deaths? Tobacco, of course.

**Resources:**

- *The Sinister Garden- A guide to the most common poisonous plants.* Wyeth Laboratories. 1996.
- *The Poison Garden- The Alnwick Garden in England.* The handbook the garden publishes about the garden itself. 2014.
- *Wicked Plants.* Amy Stewart. Algonquin Books. 2009.
- *Sunset Western Garden Book.* 2012.
- *Plants of the Pacific Northwest Coast (Revised).* Pojar & MacKinnon. Lone Pine Publishing. 1994.

**Know & Grow Workshop**

- What:** **WSU Master Gardener Know & Grow –  
“The Sinister Garden: Our Dangerous Flora”**  
WSU Master Gardener Diana Wisen will talk about common poisonous plants that you might have in your garden. There are more than you think! Come and have your awareness raised about which plants hold fatal “potions” brewed by nature.
- When:** Tuesday, November 8
- Time:** 1:00 P.M - 2:30 P.M
- Where:** WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Research and Extension Center,  
16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway)
- Cost:** Free
- Questions** Call the WSU Skagit County Extension at 360-428-4270, ext. 0.