

Is *Ricinus* Risky?



Ricinus communis, the castor bean plant, is a spectacular plant, but its seeds are deadly. Growing castor bean plant means assuming the responsibility for making sure that no one ingests the seeds. Before planting seeds, keep them out of reach of children and pets. Remove and destroy seed pods before they mature. If you want to save seed, select some seed pods that are growing high on the plant and put netting around them so that they don't fall to the ground. A member of the Euphorbiaceae (Spurge) family, *Ricinus* can cause skin irritation, so wear gloves when working with it, especially if there is reason to believe that the sap would contact your skin.

Should you choose to grow castor bean plant, consider combining it with ornamental corn, Cannas, *Tithonia*, *Datura* or *Amaranthus caudatus* (love-lies-bleeding). A combination of any of those plants can form a summer privacy hedge or screen. Grow a carpet of nasturtiums under Castor bean plant, or allow *Thunbergia* (black-eyed Susan vine) or *Ipomoea tricolor* (morning glory) to climb on it. An architectural

plant, castor bean plant's palmate leaves provide texture to large borders. It can be grown in large tubs and containers, or in a cool greenhouse with nighttime minimum temperatures of 36 degrees F and daytime temperatures in the forties. Castor bean plant does not tolerate frost.

Castor bean plant is a perennial or evergreen shrub in USDA Zones 9-11. Elsewhere, it is grown as an annual from seed. Seed catalogs, web sites and horticultural group seed exchanges are all sources of seed. Look for cultivated varieties with unusual stem, leaf, and leaf-vein colors, usually reds and bronzes, as well as different heights (from four feet to fifteen or so). The leaves of some varieties change from red to brown or green as they age. 'Carmencita,' 'Carmencita Pink,' 'Dwarf Red Spire,' 'Impala' and 'Zanzibarensis' are named cultivars.

Start seed in March. Soak seed overnight in warm water rather than trying to nick or file the seed coat of the poisonous seeds to help them begin the process of germination. Sow each seed two inches deep in its own three- or four-inch diameter pot of soil-based compost, and keep the pots at 70 degrees F. Germination may take up to three weeks. When the seedlings are six inches tall, transplant them to five-



inch diameter pots. When all danger of frost is past, plant them three to six feet apart in full sun in moist, fertile, well-drained garden soil. Regular water and fertilizer and a layer of mulch will benefit the plants. Avoid pruning. Plants may need support in exposed areas.

References

Collins, Barbara L., and Floyd A. Giles. *Landscaping Herbs*. Stipes Publishing L.L.C., 1998.

The Complete Garden Flower Book. Murdoch Books, 2001.