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# Is This Plant Toxic?

Plants protect themselves from being eaten by various methods. Some grow spines, others have a bitter taste, but the plants being discussed have another method.

## Vegetables and Fruits

In the vegetable garden, tomato, potato, eggplant and pepper belong to the deadly nightshade family. Tobacco is the fifth member, and all contain the toxic substance solanine. Tomato leaves and stems contain the poison found in potato. Sensitive people have skin eruptions if the leaves touch them. Potato and tobacco are the most dangerous. Skins of potato will turn green when stored in the light. This green part, and any sprouted eyes, must be removed before eaten. Farm animals have died when fed potato plants and spoiled potatoes. Humans experience grave illness and sometimes death from the green part of the potato. Two other members of the nightshade family are often grown in flower gardens, explained under "Flowers" Many of the fruits humans consume have toxic seeds, leaves, and bark. Cherries, apples, peaches, and pears all contain amygdalin. When digested, this poison breaks down into several compounds. Cyanide, or prussic acid, is a quick and fatal poison. The red stems of perennial rhubarb (*Rheum rhabarbanum*) are safe and delicious, but the green leaves are very poisonous. Discard them. If eaten, the kidneys could be damaged. Another perennial plant asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*) is cherished for the tender green shoots. But when mature, the fern-like stems produce bright red berries. Sensitive people break out in blisters and skin rashes when eating raw spears, or the bright red berries. Mushrooms are a very popular plant. People like to roam their habitat and pick them for eating. But many mushrooms are dangerous, and should never be eaten unless identified by a botanist. A disagreement among specialists about the species *Amanita*, or destroying angel, exists. This mushroom causes delirium, convulsions, and usually death. Fly agaric can cause a highly drunken and hallucinatory state. It was once used for respiratory ailments.

## House Plants and Decorations

Poinsettia (*E. pulcherrima*) and crown of thorns (*E. milii*), members of the Euphorbia family, should be kept away from children. Each produces a milky sap that can blister and burn. These and other members of the spurge family can also produce stomach pains and affect the digestive system. Two of the Arums, used as house plants, philodendron (*Philodendron*) and dumbcane (*Diffenbachia*) contain toxins that will cause the throat to swell to the point of suffocation when the leaves are eaten. Mistletoe is a symbol of Christmas. Many children die from eating the toxic berries. The beautiful azalea (*Rhododendron simsii*) plant contains a deadly poison. Ancient peoples pulverized the leaves, feeding the fish to catch them easier. Flowering red or white Cyclamen (*Cyclamen persicum*) is also best to keep out of the reach of children.

## Wild Plants

Plants that poison by contact include all the poison ivy, oak and sumac. Not everyone will be sensitive to the oils in the leaves and stems. The reaction is not deadly, but will produce sores and rashes on the part of the skin that touches the plant. Even the smoke from burning these plants can cause problems. Some of these plants are: oleander, poison ivy, oak and sumac, and eucalyptus. Folks new to the West often cut branches of nearby shrubs to use in cooking. The oleander (*Nerium oleander*) leaves and bark contain toxin. The poison can cause severe illness and, sometimes, death. Smelling the flowers could create problems for someone with asthma or heart trouble. Western milkweeds are among the most deadly of plants. But people in many parts of the country gather the young shoots of milkweed, pokeweed and the fiddleheads of ferns for a spring delicacy. Monarch butterflies lay their eggs on milkweed plants. The caterpillars eat the leaves, and store the toxin in their bodies. Birds know not to eat these butterflies.