

# Poisonous garden plants

GWF380  
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**Gardeners, children and pets are all vulnerable to poisonous and irritant plants. Use the plant list overleaf to minimise risk in your garden.**

Of the tens of thousands of plants available to gardeners, just over 100 have been identified as causing harm, and of these, less than half are seriously toxic or irritant. However, if young children use your garden or if you have pets, it's important to know which plants can cause problems, so that you can plan your garden to minimise risk. Even in a garden used only by adults, it's a good idea to avoid placing irritant plants such as rue next to paths, where they can brush against skin and could cause blistering.

Commonly grown garden plants and houseplants which have caused poisoning in humans, and those which are known to cause severe skin irritation or allergic reactions are shown on the reverse side of the factsheet. This does not mean that plants not listed are not poisonous or irritant - just that there is no evidence that they are likely to cause you harm.

## Poisoning of humans

Symptoms of poisoning can include stomach pains, vomiting, diarrhoea and, less commonly, convulsions and irregular heartbeat. Poisonous plants may even kill, if eaten in large enough quantities. Different people can be affected in different ways, and quantities of a poisonous plant that cause severe symptoms in one person may cause only mild stomach pains in another.

In the garden, keep an eye on children at the crawling and toddling stage who are likely to put small objects like berries in their mouths. Older children, who may try nibbling plants to see if they are edible, should be taught not to eat plants that are not recognised food. Children are more vulnerable to poisoning than adults because of their lower body weight.

If you suspect someone has eaten a poisonous plant, follow the advice given overleaf.

## Skin irritation

Adults gardening and children playing in vegetation may come into contact with plants that cause skin irritation, which takes several forms. Irritant contact dermatitis is caused by plants such as euphorbias, whose sap is so irritant it can cause skin or eye injuries. Other plants such as rue (*Ruta graveolens*) and giant hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*) cause phytophoto contact dermatitis; so when the skin is exposed to sunlight, severe blistering can result. Allergic contact dermatitis is a skin allergy which occurs after at least two contacts with the plant. Many irritant plants on the list will only cause problems for people with sensitive skin. Minimise the risk of plants irritating your skin by wearing gloves, long-sleeved shirts or jumpers and trousers whenever

you work closely with plants.

## Treating skin irritation

- ❖ If plant sap comes into contact with skin, wash it off as soon as possible.
- ❖ Keep irritated skin out of sunlight.
- ❖ Do not rub or scratch affected areas.
- ❖ If skin blisters or becomes painful, visit your GP.

## Poisoning of pets

Avoid leaving hedge clippings or uprooted plants within reach of farm animals or pets. In the past, *Gardening Which?* has reported on dogs poisoned by shredded rhododendron and on a member's puppy that died after chewing monkshood (*Aconitum*) root. If you think an animal has eaten a poisonous plant, seek veterinary advice straight away. Take a sample of the plant along and don't try to make the animal vomit.

## Sale of poisonous or irritant plants

In 1995 The Horticultural Trades Association (HTA), in association with the National Poisons Unit, The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and the Royal Horticultural Society introduced a voluntary Code of Practice. Revised in 2000, this lists 115 plants and gives details of how they should be labelled.

If your local nursery or garden centre belongs to the HTA

poisonous, irritant or allergenic plants should be labelled as such; speak to the manager if you find that labelling is inadequate. *Gardening Which?* is interested in examples of poor labelling so let us know if you find any.

### If poisoning is suspected

❖ Encourage the person to drink a glassful of clear fluid (water or diluted juice) straight away, provided that they are fully conscious and in no obvious pain.

❖ Telephone your GP or call NHS Direct 0845 4647. If told to visit the doctor or hospital take a piece of the plant with you with leaves and flowers or berries if possible, and write down the name of the plant if you know it.

### Poisonous, irritant and allergenic garden plants

<i>Acalypha</i>	P	I	<i>Epipremnum</i>	P	I	<i>Papaver somniferum</i>	P	-
<i>Acokanthera</i>	P	-	<i>Euonymus</i>	P	-	<i>Passiflora carerulea</i>	P	-
<b>Aconitum</b>	P[1]	-	<b>Euphorbia</b>	P	I	<i>Patinaca sativa</i> (leaves)	P	-
<i>Actaea</i> Section <i>Actaea</i>	P	I	(not <i>E. pulcherrima</i> )			<i>Pedilanthus</i>	P	I
<i>Adenium</i>	P	-	<i>Ficus benjamina</i>	-	A	<i>Philodendron</i>	P	I
<i>Aesculus</i>	P	-	<i>Ficus carica</i>	-	I/S	<b>Phytolacca</b>	P	-
<i>Aglaonema</i>	P	I	<i>Fremontodendron</i>	-	I	<i>Podophyllum</i>	P	-
<i>Agrostemma githago</i>	P	-	<i>Gaultheria</i> Section	P	-	<i>Polygonatum</i>	P	-
<i>Allamanda</i>	P	I	<i>Pernettya</i>			<i>Polyscias</i>	P	I
<i>Allocasia</i>	P	I	<i>Gelsemium</i>	P	-	<i>Primula obconica</i>	-	A
<i>Aloe</i>	P	-	<b><i>Gloriosa superba</i></b>	P	-	<i>Prunus laurocerasus</i> and	P	-
<i>Alstroemeria</i>	-	A	<i>Hedera</i>	P	A	<i>P. lusitanicus</i> (seed) [3]		
<i>Amaryllis belladonna</i>	P	-	<i>Helleborus</i>	P	I	<i>Rhamnus</i>	P	-
<i>Anthurium</i>	P	I	<b>Heracleum</b>	-	I/S	<i>Rhaphidophora</i>	P	I
<i>Apocynum</i>	P	-	<i>Hippeastrum</i>	P	-	<i>Rheum x hybridum</i> (leaves)	P	-
<i>Arisaema</i>	P	I	<i>Homeria</i>	P	-	<b><i>Rhus radicans</i> and</b>	P	I
<b>Arum</b>	P	I	<i>Hyacinthoides</i>	P	-	<b><i>R. verniciflua</i> [4]</b>		
<i>Asparagus</i>			<i>Hyacinthus</i>	P	I	<b><i>Ricinus communis</i></b>	P	-
(not <i>A. officinalis</i> )	P[2]	I	<b>Hyocyanus</b>	P	-	<i>Robinia pseudoacacia</i>	P	-
<b>Atropa</b>	P	-	<i>Hypericum perforatum</i>	P	-	<b>Ruta</b>	-	I/S
<b>Brugmansia</b>	P	-	<i>Ipomoea</i>	P	-	<i>Sambucus</i> (not <i>S. nigra</i> )	P	A
<i>Brunfelsia</i>	P	-	<i>Iris</i>	P	-	<i>Schefflera</i>	-	A
<i>Caladium</i>	P	I	<i>Kalmia</i>	P	-	<i>Scilla</i>	P	-
<i>Caltha</i>	P	I	<b><i>Laburnocytisus adamii</i></b>	P	-	<b>Scopolia</b>	P	-
<i>Capsicum annum</i>	P	I	<b>Laburnum</b>	P	-	<b>Solandra</b>	P	-
(decorative)			<i>Lagenaria</i>	P	-	<i>Solanum</i> (decorative)	P	-
<i>Chelidonium majus</i>	P	I	<i>Lantana</i>	P	-	<b><i>Solanum dulcamara</i></b>	P	-
<i>Chrysanthemum</i>	-	A	<i>Ligustrum</i>	P	-	<b>Sophora</b>	P	-
<b>Colchicum</b>	P	-	<i>Lobelia</i> (not <i>L. erinus</i> )	P	-	<i>Spartium</i>	P	-
<i>Colocasia esculenta</i>	P	I	<i>Lupinus</i>	P	-	<i>Spathiphyllum</i>	P	I
<b>Convallaria</b>	P	-	<i>Lysichiton</i>	P	I	<i>Symphoricarpus</i>	P	-
<b>Coriaria</b>	P	-	<b>Mandragora</b>	P	-	<i>Syngonium</i>	P	I
x <i>Cupressocyparis leylandii</i>	-	A	<i>Mirabilis</i>	P	I	<i>Tabernamontana</i>	P	-
<b>Daphne</b>	P	-	<i>Monstera deliciosa</i>	P	I	<b>Taxus</b>	P	-
<b>Datura</b>	P	-	<i>Narcissus</i>	P	I	<b>Thevetia</b>	P	-
<i>Delphinium</i>	P	-	<b>Nerium</b>	P	-	<i>Tulipa</i>	P	A
<i>Dictamnus albus</i>	-	I/S	<i>Nicotiana</i>	P	-	<b>Veratrum</b>	P	-
<b>Dieffenbachia</b>	P	I	<b><i>Oenanthe crocata,</i></b>	P	-	<i>Vitex</i>	-	I
<b>Digitalis</b>	P	-	<b><i>aquatica &amp; phellandrium</i></b>			<i>Wisteria</i>	P	-
<i>Dracunculus</i>	P	I	<i>Opuntia microdasys</i>	-	I	<i>Xanthosoma</i>	P	I
<b>Echium</b>	-	I	<b>Ornithogalum</b>	P	-	<b>Zantedescia</b>	P	I

#### KEY

P = plants known to be poisonous if eaten. Plants most likely to cause serious harm even when ingested in small quantities are shown in bold. Seek medical attention immediately if poisoning with these plants is suspected

I = plants known to cause irritant reactions.

I/S = plants which cause irritant reactions when affected skin is exposed to sunlight. Plants capable of causing severe, burn-like reactions are shown as a bold I/S.

A = plants commonly known to cause allergies.

Note: It is possible to develop an allergic reaction to any plant.

Plants not in the Table which members have reported reactions to include courgettes, *Hoya carnososa*, pelargoniums, runner beans, strawberries and tomatoes.

#### FOOTNOTES

[1] Also harmful via skin

[2] Fruit only

[3] Leaves contain cyanide compounds, so do not burn hedge cuttings, prunings etc

[4] Also *Rhus diversiloba*, *R. rydbergii*, *R. striata*, *R. succedanea*, *R. toxicarium* and *R. vernix*