

Houseplant Safety

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Most of our homes are graced with houseplants. As adults, we realize these plants are to be looked at and not eaten, but children may have other ideas. Be sure children understand about houseplant safety, and if necessary, place houseplants so little hands cannot reach them. Following are some plants that require caution.

Members of the Araceae family

These plants contain needle-like crystals of calcium oxalate that penetrate and irritate tissues of the mouth and throat. Chemicals in their sap, such as asparagine (a protein), also can cause inflammation of mucous membranes. Plants in this family include dieffenbachia, philodendron, caladium, and elephant's ear. Symptoms of poisoning from dieffenbachia are intense burning and irritation of the mouth, tongue, and lips. Although rare, if the reaction is severe enough, the swelling can seal off the breathing passages. Philodendron, caladium, and elephant's ear produce the same types of symptoms when ingested. If a piece of the corm (underground stem) is eaten, symptoms are a fiery burning of the mouth and throat. Jack-in-the-pulpit is a native member to watch in this family.

Members of the Euphorbiaceae (spurge) family

Most members of the spurge family have a milky sap this is acrid and toxic. This sap can cause dermatitis in some people and poisoning if eaten by someone who is allergic to the chemicals in the

sap. Members of this family include the crown-of-thorns, the pencil tree (milk bush), poinsettia, and snow-on-the-mountain. Snow-on-the-mountain can cause blisters and skin burns.

It is appropriate to note here the debate about the poinsettia. The original warnings on this plant were from a report in 1919 on a child who died in Hawaii where poinsettia is used as an outdoor ornamental. However, laboratory tests have NOT confirmed the toxicity of the plant when ingested. Poison control centers receive many reports each year of ingestion of poinsettia, but only occasional abdominal pain and nausea have been documented.

Members of the Solanaceae family

These plants contain solanine, a poisonous glycoalkaloid, that is extremely toxic even in small amounts. Jerusalem cherry is an ornamental in this family. Eating its berries cause symptoms ranging from headaches and stomach pains to shock and paralysis of the circulatory and respiratory systems. However, not all members of the Solanaceae family are toxic; for example, tomatoes and peppers.

Now that you are aware of possible dangers with certain houseplants, you can take steps to ensure the safety of others around these lovely plants. Try using hanging baskets, high shelves, or window boxes to keep plants away from children. You don't need to stop displaying the plants mentioned above, just do so carefully.

Note to “Houseplant Safety”

Note: The fruit of tomato and the tubers of potato plants are edible, but the stems and leaves of tomato and potato plants contain solanines and should not be eaten, raw or cooked. This is the reason that eyes and small sprouts on potato tubers should be removed during food preparation. Any green part of a potato can contain solanines. Once potatoes sprout, they begin to produce solanines in the potato itself. Do not eat potatoes that have a distinct bitter taste or any part of a potato that is green as these characters are associated with solanines. Solanine poisoning from potato tubers is extremely rare because cultivated varieties of potatoes are low in solanines to begin with, a cumulative diet of bitter potatoes would be required, and fresh potatoes are readily available.

James G. Tokuhsa
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