

# Wicked Plants: What's growing in your garden?

By Marion Dale of Crewkerne u3a

## Toxic Plants

**Ragwort:** Good for pollinators but fatal if eaten by horses and cattle. Often included in wild garden seed mixes. NOT a notifiable weed.

**Foxgloves:** All parts toxic but especially the leaves. Need to wash hands after touching. Used by Lucretia Borgia to poison unwanted lovers and by Agatha Christie in her novels. Van Gogh suffered from epilepsy and used it to self-medicate but it causes a yellow halo effect around lights. This can be seen in some of his paintings.

**Monkshood:** Grown for its vivid blue colour but all parts are poisonous.

**Laburnum:** All parts of the tree are poisonous to humans and animals. If the seeds fall into water, it renders the water poisonous too.

**English Yew:** Seeds poisonous but the flesh around them is a good source of Vitamin C,

**Holly:** Berries poisonous although not to blackbirds!

## Skin irritants

**Euphorbia:** the latex-based sap gives a bad reaction if touched. Poinsettias are a relative and sap gives a similar reaction.

**Stinging nettle:** Sap in hairs causes skin to blister.

**Chrysanthemums:** There are toxins in the hairs on the leaves which can cause severe problems in the floristry and horticultural industries.

**Tulips:** The sap can cause an eczema-like reaction.

**Daphne:** sap causes severe blistering and was used by beggars to invoke sympathy – rubbed onto faces etc.

## Plants with secrets

**Morning glory:** If the seeds are soaked in water and then eaten, they produce an LSD effect. Now seeds are treated not to give this effect. This plant is banned in South Africa.

**Castor oil plant:** When castor oil is produced a deadly poison called ricin is also made which is destroyed by heating to a high temperature. Ricin is 550 times more poisonous than arsenic and there is no antidote. It is fatal to all mammals.

**Opium poppy:** Brought to the UK by the Romans as a medicinal plant, but it is a source of opium. It was exported from India to China by the East India Company in return for tea. It inspired the writings of Lewis Carroll, Dickens, and Samuel Coleridge (Kubla Khan). Laudanum (10% opium, 90% alcohol) was used in Victorian times for 'women's problems' and toothache. It is very addictive.

**Rhubarb:** the stalks are used in deserts, but the leaves should not be used in salads, for example, as they contain high levels of oxalic acid. This can cause convulsions and coma. It is rendered harmless after 6 months in a compost heap.

**Elderberry:** The raw, unripe fruits contain cyanide. Once cooked and made into wine it is safe.

**Oleander:** all parts are highly toxic so don't use to make wooden skewers for barbecues! The smoke is toxic and don't eat the honey!

## The most wicked plant family – the Solanaceae

**Potatoes:** green tubers are poisonous

**Tomatoes:** some people are allergic to uncooked fruits and leaves can be an irritant.

**Capsicums:** A severe burning sensation can result from eating the hotter relatives of the chilli family.

**Deadly nightshade:** Poisonous but used to dilate the pupils in eye examinations. Italian ladies used it to dilate their pupils to make them more attractive hence it's common name 'Belladonna'.

**Tobacco:** Has killed millions of people world-wide.

### Misleading look-alikes

**Cow parsley** (grooved stems) or poisonous **hemlock** (spotted stems) or **giant hogweed** (6-8 foot tall when mature). Latter causes photosensitive burns. You can be prosecuted if you introduce it deliberately.

**Daffodil bulbs or onions?**

**Wild garlic** (ramsons) or **Lily of the valley?**

### Offensive smelling plants

**Crown Imperial Fritillary** smells of dog fox.

**Stinking hellebores** – rotting meat.

**Box, flowering currant, viburnum** – cat's wee

### Baddies turned into good guys.

**Opium poppies** produce the powerful painkiller morphine.

**Yew** contains taxol used in cancer treatment.

**Snowdrops** and **daffodils** contain galantamine which slows down the deterioration of memory functions and used to treat Alzheimer's.

**Foxglove** – digitalin is used to treat heart problems.

**Collections of poisonous plants can be found at the Poison garden at Alnwick, Santa Cruz in Tenerife and the Chelsea Physic garden.**