



Toxic Plants

By Jessie Eisenstein

With freezing temperatures outside, houseplants help fulfill the desire to garden year-round. And, now that the holidays are over, you probably have a few new plants in your home. Gift plants make festive contributions to your overall decor, but they can be potential hazards to children and pets. Some plants are poisonous and can cause serious illness and, in rare cases, death. The good news: you can safeguard your home — without giving up all of your plants.

The first step toward preventing plant poisoning is to make sure you can correctly identify every plant in your home by both the common and Latin names. Plant labels are not just for use out-of-doors. They may be discretely pushed into the soil of a potted plant or displayed as a decorative accent. Either way, if you own something that is not plainly recognizable, take the time to look it up in a reference book.

A book like the *AMA Handbook of Poisonous and Injurious Plants* is a helpful reference tool. Another good resource is your regional poison control center. The center will offer answers to any questions you may have about your plants and toxicity; you also may request a list of poisonous plants. Plant toxicity falls into a wide range of classifications. A poisonous plant may cause something as minor as a skin irritation and as serious as vomiting, diarrhea or even death.

One way to guard against plant poisoning is to teach children never to eat non-food plants. This obviously applies to the outdoors as well; nothing in the wild should be consumed if it can't be positively identified. Even a non-poisonous houseplant can be a risk if it is within a child's reach; leaves and soil can get lodged in the throat and cause suffocation.

In most cases, keeping your plants out of reach will prevent poisoning. However, there are some plants, like the coffee plant (*Coffea arabica*), that are highly toxic and should not be kept in your home at all if you have small

comfort will generally stop someone from consuming enough to cause a more severe reaction, like swelling and closure of airways.

Another common houseplant, the shamrock plant (*Oxalis*), can cause nausea, vomiting, kidney inflammation and, in severe cases, death due to kidney failure. It contains oxalic acid (the genus name offers a clue), which is toxic.

Plant names can be tricky — precisely why it is imperative that you know the Latin name. Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*) is a harmless holiday favorite, but some other members of the cactus family are toxic. They can cause skin irritations and other more severe reactions, not to mention painful pricks!

Any plant that has been chemically treated is also potentially harmful to children and pets. Before you bring plants indoors or bring in cut flowers or branches, find out if any pesticide has been used on them. If you get flowers from a florist, check to see what type of floral preservative has been used. Citric acid is a safe preservative.

Finally, if a plant is eaten, remove plant material from the person's or animal's mouth immediately. You should have the phone number of your regional poison control center posted and a bottle of ipecac on hand. (Syrup of ipecac, made from a rootstock extract of the tropical shrub *Cephaelis ipecacuanha*, is used to induce vomiting.) Always call the poison control center before administering this syrup. There are some plants that, when combined with ipecac, will cause even more damage. Above all, stay calm. A minute or two spent gathering information (the name of the plant and how much was consumed) is better than acting in haste. ▮



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*It's tempting to use these beautiful poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) as a focal point in the living room. But, if you have children or pets, it's best to move them to a higher location. Poinsettias are not deadly, as was once thought, but because they may irritate the digestive tract if consumed, they should be kept out of reach of children and pets.*

children or pets. Pencil tree cactus (*Euphorbia tirucalli*), though not deadly, should be avoided as well, if it cannot be kept safely out of reach. The milky sap is intensely irritating to the skin and digestive tract.

Amaryllis (*Hippeastrum*), a common gift plant, contains properties that will cause nausea, vomiting and diarrhea when ingested. Members of the *Narcissus* genus, like the daffodil, also are extremely poisonous, particularly the bulbs. This is something to keep in mind, especially if you store your bulbs in the refrigerator — they are easily mistaken for onions.

The philodendron is a poisonous plant that is not extremely toxic. It causes a burning sensation in the lips, mouth and throat; this immediate dis-