

Toxic Plants in the Garden

By Susan Camp

Last Tuesday morning, I cleaned up a mildly neglected bed of common mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum tenuifolium*) and slender mountain mint (*P. virginianum*). Both are hardy, easily grown native plants that tolerate drought, deer, and mediocre growing conditions. They attract bees, butterflies, and other pollinators. Like other mints, they have a strong fragrance and fuzzy leaves and stems. I worked in the bed for a couple of hours, crawling between the plants, the leaves brushing my face.

Later, I noticed that my cheeks were red and burning, and I had splotches on my neck. I think the irritation was caused by the mountain mint, although NC State Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox entries on various *Pycnanthemum* species do not list contact dermatitis as an adverse effect of handling the fuzzy stems and leaves. In fact, mountain mint leaves are edible.

My reaction was mild, although some redness remained for a few days. I don't know why I was affected by mountain mint, although I had a similar reaction-- redness without the burning-- several years ago while removing English ivy (*Hedera helix*) from our woods.

So why did I react to mountain mint even though it isn't listed as having toxic or irritating properties? I don't know, but any of us can have a reaction to a specific plant for a variety of reasons, and we can't predict when it will happen or if the reaction will recur.

Fortunately, my reaction to mountain mint wasn't serious, but since the spooky season of Hallowe'en is upon us, what could be a better time of year to examine a few alluring and fascinating plants that require careful handling and placement in the garden? Plant toxicity can range from mild skin, eye, or throat irritation to serious or even fatal symptoms.

Do you remember poor Larry Talbot (Lon Chaney, Jr.), the unwilling werewolf in the 1941 film "The Wolfman"? The rhyme quoted in the film said, "Even a man who is pure of heart, and says his prayers by night, may become a wolf when the wolfsbane blooms and the autumn moon is bright." Wolfsbane (*Aconitum napellus*), also called monkshood for the shape of its flowers, is a pretty perennial with deep purple blooms and dark green leaves. Aconite contains several plant alkaloids that cause severe to fatal cardiovascular, neurological, and intestinal symptoms when ingested. Aconite is so toxic that you should wear gloves when handling it.

One of the loveliest winter-blooming plants is hellebore, also called Christmas rose (*Helleborus niger*). Unfortunately, the pretty flowers, which are often used in arrangements, contain a cardiac glycoside that can slow the heart rate and other substances that can cause skin, mouth, and gastrointestinal irritation. Wear gloves when handling hellebore to prevent contact dermatitis.

Living and dried hellebore parts once were used to treat mental illness, epilepsy, and to purge the body of intestinal parasites. Sadly, the cure sometimes caused more damage than the parasites, and the patient died.

Deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*) is another attractive perennial that has a long history of medicinal use. Deadly nightshade, like the tomato and potato, is a member of the Solanaceae Family, and contains chemicals called tropanes. The drugs atropine and scopolamine are derived from deadly nightshade. Atropine is used to dilate pupils during an eye exam, and scopolamine is used in a skin patch to relieve motion sickness.

A nightshade cousin, Carolina horsenettle (*Solanum carolinense*), is a common prickly plant in gardens and fields. It is not a true nettle, and all parts are toxic if consumed. Most horsenettle flowers have five white or pale lavender petals; a pretty four-petaled blue flower is an occasional variant.

We can prevent the occurrence of accidental poisoning by following a few simple guidelines. Learn about the plants in your garden. Wear appropriate protective clothing when working outdoors. Supervise young children and pets, and keep the phone numbers for human and animal poison control centers in your cell phone.

Then relax and enjoy the Trick or Treaters!