



Department of Agriculture and Food



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# Harmful garden plants *in Western Australia*



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Department of Agriculture and Food



# Harmful garden plants *in* Western Australia





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## Harmful garden plants in Western Australia

Many garden plants can cause harm. Some are commercially available and very popular; others are no longer readily available but still exist in older gardens; and yet others are favourite indoor ornamentals, cut-flowers, weeds, or even fruit and vegetables that we consume frequently, often without realising that other parts of those same plants are harmful.

It is impractical and unnecessary to remove from our gardens every single plant that could conceivably be harmful. A more sensible approach is to be aware of the potential danger of a particular plant, and then assess how much or how little risk it poses to the people and animals that live on or visit your property.

The Department of Agriculture and Food's 'Pest and Disease Information Service' (Free call 1800 084 881) can identify most plants and provide information on their harmful properties.

There are three basic ways in which plants can act as irritants and cause harm: when eaten, when touched, or when inhaled.

### ***Irritant when eaten***

Different toxic properties in different plants produce a range of symptoms when eaten. Some cause gastro-intestinal upsets with vomiting and diarrhoea. Others cause burning and swelling of the mouth and throat, sometimes leading to difficulty in swallowing or breathing. Yet others affect the nervous system or result in organ damage. Certain plants are so poisonous that they may cause serious illness or even death, depending on the amount consumed.

In general, all people react similarly after eating a particular poisonous plant. Some plants are poisonous to people but not to stock or other animals. (Be aware of the fact that trees

and woody shrubs that contain toxins may also produce toxic smoke if you burn the prunings.)

For cases of suspected poisoning, telephone the Poisons Information Centre (13 11 26), which has a national computer link indicating the toxicity of most plants, together with poisoning symptoms and appropriate treatment.

If medical (or veterinary) treatment is needed, try to take with you a sample of the plant that you believe has poisoned the patient. Correct botanical identification is essential because it helps the medical professional to determine which toxins are involved and which treatment is the most appropriate.

### ***Irritant when touched***

There are many ways in which different plants cause harm when touched. Caustic sap burns the skin and is especially injurious if accidentally transferred from the hands to the mouth or eyes; indeed, in extreme cases, some caustic sap can cause blindness. Caustic juice is another danger, with that of chilli being the prime example.

Sharp-tipped leaves and thorns that puncture the skin sometimes cause blistering and burning, but sharp-tipped leaves and thorns are usually visible and so more easily avoided. By contrast, sharp-edged leaves, like those of pampas grass, are an unseen danger that can cause serious lacerations.

Caustic sap affects virtually everyone in a similar way, but other kinds of sap, and also fine hairs on stems and leaves, may trigger an allergic reaction in sensitive people only, causing contact dermatitis. Some people can handle *Grevillea* species and cultivars, for example, without being affected while others suffer a severe allergic reaction.







For cases of suspected caustic sap injuries or contact dermatitis, telephone the Poisons Information Centre (13 11 26) and seek medical treatment if necessary.

#### ***Irritant when inhaled***

The pollen and sometimes the perfume of certain plants, when inhaled, can trigger asthma or hay fever – but only in those people for whom those specific plants are the individual triggers. The most common irritant when inhaled is fine wind-borne pollen from grasses and catkin-bearing trees. However, the severity of the reaction depends on the person, and it is possible for one person to be allergic to just a single plant. Because of this distinction, plants that trigger allergic respiratory complaints cannot be adequately covered in this book.

For a list of known inhaled irritants and a list of low allergen garden plants, telephone the Asthma Foundation of Western Australia on Freecall 1800 645 130.

#### ***Assessing actual risk compared to potential for harm***

Before removing favourite plants from the garden just because they have a capacity to cause harm, you might like to consider whether or not they really do pose a threat. Actual risk depends on a number of variable factors.

A highly poisonous plant may present little risk to the community at large if it is rarely grown. A highly poisonous plant may also present very little risk in your own garden if it is inaccessible to children or if it is an exotic that rarely grows big enough in Western Australia to be able to produce, for instance, poisonous bark or fruits.

On the other hand, a plant of low to medium toxicity may present a big risk if it is commonly planted in large numbers

at a level where curious toddlers, young pets or hungry stock are tempted to taste it – daffodil is a good example.

Another point to consider is that what may appear to be an obvious danger is not necessarily the danger that will most often materialise.

Parents worry about children being attracted to brightly coloured berries – and, indeed, statistics show that children occasionally do eat the berries of arum lily, for example. Poisonous berries usually taste so bitter or burn the mouth so badly, however, that the likelihood of many being eaten is reduced.

Adults may be at greater risk of sustaining harm if they confidently start pruning garden plants or pulling weeds without realising that contact dermatitis or injury from caustic sap can result.

Necklaces and decorations made of seeds may contain poisonous ones, so do not let children chew them.

Widely held misconceptions about the beneficial qualities of certain plants are another unexpected area of risk. Some herbs may aid health when used in small quantities or for short periods whereas prolonged, excessive usage may cause harm. Aloe vera is generally perceived as beneficial since its soothing qualities are promoted in commercially available skin-care products that contain its inner gel – yet all other parts of the plant can cause poisoning if eaten and the sap is caustic.

A sinister influence to be aware of, especially if your children use the Internet, is the fact that a number of websites encourage experimentation with plants that are known to possess or are suspected of possessing hallucinogenic properties.

### Correct identification

Plants in this book are listed alphabetically under common names, simply because common names are what most people recognise. However, common names can be confusing because one name is sometimes applied to more than one plant. Naked lady, for example, is an alternative common name for pencil bush (*Euphorbia tirucalli*), a small tree, while naked ladies is an alternative common name for belladonna lily (*Amaryllis belladonna*), a bulbous plant. Whenever possible, learn and use the botanical name or, at least, the genus (the first part of the botanical name), as this assists in correct identification.

In particular, it is important to be able to recognise the genus, because all or most of the species within that genus may have harmful properties in common, as the following example demonstrates. Among the many plants that some people loosely call cacti are certain spherical, succulent species of *Euphorbia*. They look nothing like other species of *Euphorbia* because this is a diverse genus that embraces crown of thorns, pencil bush, poinsettia, and spurges (both weeds and ornamentals). The critical fact to know is that they are all *Euphorbia* species and therefore all have caustic sap.

Another example of common name confusion is deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*), which is not present in Western Australia. However, black or blackberry nightshade (*Solanum nigrum*) does grow in Western Australia, where it is often mistakenly called deadly nightshade.

### Explanation of ratings in the A to Z of harmful garden plants in Western Australia

These are general ratings. They may change under your particular conditions - for example, if there are many pets or small children in your household or garden that might be exposed to these plants.

Harm key:

**L-M** low to medium harm potential

**M-H** medium to high harm potential

**H** high harm potential

**E** irritant when eaten

**T** irritant when touched

**S** also harmful to stock and other animals

The following A to Z list of plants is not comprehensive. It is intended as a guide only.

If a plant is rated 'T', do not assume that the absence of a rating 'E' means it is safe to eat, because the absence of the 'E' rating may simply mean that no cases of poisoning by eating have been recorded.

Similarly, where the 'S' rating is absent, this does not mean a plant is safe for stock or other animals to eat – it just means records cannot prove it is harmful.

Never experiment by eating any plants or parts of plants that are not well known as being edible.





Apple of Sodom



Angel's trumpet



Arum lily

Common name/s	Botanical name	Harmful parts	Rating
Aconite, monkshood	<i>Aconitum napellus</i>	all	E H S
African milk bush	<i>Synadenium grantii</i>	sap	L-M S T
Agapanthus, lily of the Nile	<i>Agapanthus praecox</i>	sap, leaves	L-M T
Agave, century plant	<i>Agave americana</i>	sap	M-H T
Allamanda	<i>Allamanda cathartica</i>	all	E L-M T
Aloe vera	<i>Aloe vera</i>	all	E M-H S T
Angel's trumpet	<i>Brugmansia</i> spp (syn. <i>Datura</i> spp)	all, including nectar	E H
Apple of Sodom	<i>Solanum sodomaeum</i> , <i>S. linnaeanum</i>	fruit, other parts	E L-M
Aquilegia, columbine, granny's bonnets	<i>Aquilegia</i> spp	seeds	E L-M
Apricot	<i>Prunus armeniaca</i>	kernels	E M-H S
Arum lily, calla lily	<i>Zantedeschia aethiopica</i>	all, especially flower spike and berries	E H
Asclepias, milkweed - (see also narrow-leaf cotton bush)	<i>Asclepias curassavica</i>	roots, sap	L-M T
Autumn crocus	<i>Colchicum autumnale</i>	leaves, corm, seeds	E H S
Avocado	<i>Persea americana</i>	leaves	E L-M S
Azalea (and rhododendron)	<i>Rhododendron</i> spp and cultivars	all (and honey from bees that visit the flowers)	E M-H S

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Common name/s	Botanical name	Harmful parts	Rating
Belladonna lily, Easter lily, naked ladies	<i>Amaryllis belladonna</i>	bulb	E L-M T
Bitter almond	<i>Prunus dulcis</i>	kernels	E H
Black bean, Moreton Bay chestnut	<i>Castanospermum australe</i>	seeds	E L-M
Black locust, false acacia, robinia	<i>Robinia psuedoacacia</i> and cultivars	all	E H S
Black or blackberry nightshade (incorrectly called deadly nightshade)	<i>Solanum nigrum</i>	unripe fruit, all green parts	E H
Bluebell	<i>Hyacinthoides hispanica</i>	bulb	E L-M
Bookleaf	<i>Thuja occidentalis</i>	leaves	L-M T S
Box	<i>Buxus</i> spp	all	L-M T
Brachychiton, flame tree, kurrajong	<i>Brachychiton</i> spp	hairs on seeds	L-M T
Bracken fern	<i>Pteridium esculentum</i>	all	E L-M S
Brazilian, broad-leaf, Californian or Japanese pepper tree - (see also pepper tree)	<i>Schinus terebinthifolia</i>	fruit, leaves	E L-M T
Bushman's poison, wintersweet	<i>Acokanthera spectabilis</i>	all	E H
Caladium	<i>Caladium</i> spp	all	E L-M T
Californian pepper tree – see Brazilian pepper tree - (and also pepper tree)			



Belladonna lily



Bracken fern



Bushman's poison

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Camphor laurel



Castor oil plant



Chalice vine

Common name/s	Botanical name	Harmful parts	Rating
Calla lily – see arum lily			
Camphor laurel	<i>Cinnamomum camphora</i>	all	E L-M S T
Cape honey flower	<i>Melianthus comosus</i>	root	E L-M
Cape lilac, white cedar	<i>Melia azedarach</i>	all	E H
Cardinal flower	<i>Lobelia cardinalis</i>	all	E H S T
Cassava	<i>Manihot esculenta</i>	raw root	E L-M
Castor oil plant	<i>Ricinus communis</i>	seeds	E H
Catha, khat	<i>Catha edulis</i>	seeds, leaves	E L-M
Century plant – see agave			
Cestrum, jessamine	<i>Cestrum</i> spp	all, especially fruit	E L-M
Chalice vine	<i>Solandra</i> spp	sap, leaves, flowers	E H S
Cherry laurel	<i>Prunus laurocerasus</i>	leaves, fruit	E H
Chilli	<i>Capsicum</i> spp	fruit, seeds	E M-H T
Chincherinchee and other ornithogalums	<i>Ornithogalum</i> spp	bulb, flower spike	H S T
Chinese tallow tree	<i>Sapium sebiferum</i>	fruit, leaves, sap	E L-M S T
Chrysanthemum	<i>Chrysanthemum</i> spp	all	L-M T

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Common name/s	Botanical name	Harmful parts	Rating
Clematis (including traveller's joy)	<i>Clematis</i> spp	all	E L-M S T
Clivia	<i>Clivia miniata</i>	all	E L-M S T
Columbine – see aquilegia			
Common ivy, English ivy	<i>Hedera helix</i>	all	L-M T
Coral bush	<i>Jatropha podagrica</i>	fruit, seeds	E L-M T
Crocus (autumn) – see autumn crocus			
Crown of thorns	<i>Euphorbia milii</i> and cultivars	sap, thorns	L-M T
Cuckoo pint, Italian arum	<i>Arum italicum</i>	all	E L-M
Cycad (various - see also zamia)	<i>Cycas</i> and <i>Macrozamia</i> spp	seeds, leaves	E L-M S
Cyclamen	<i>Cyclamen</i> spp	tuber	E L-M S
Daffodil (including jonquil)	<i>Narcissus</i> spp	sap, leaves, bulb	E L-M S
Deadly nightshade - (see note under 'Correct identification' in introduction)			
Delphinium (including larkspur)	<i>Delphinium</i> spp	seeds, leaves	E H
Dieffenbachia, dumbcane	<i>Dieffenbachia</i> spp	stems, leaves	E L-M
Dumbcane – see dieffenbachia			



Clivia



Coral bush



Delphinium

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*Euonymus*



*False jasmine*



*Foxglove*

Common name/s	Botanical name	Harmful parts	Rating
Duranta, pigeon berry	<i>Duranta repens</i>	fruit	<b>E H S</b>
Dutchman's pipe	<i>Aristolochia</i> spp	all, including sap	<b>L-M T</b>
Easter lily – see belladonna lily			
Elephant's ear and taro	<i>Alocasia</i> spp	leaves, uncooked roots	<b>E L-M T</b>
English ivy - see common ivy			
Euonymus, spindle tree (including Japanese spindle)	<i>Euonymus</i> spp	fruit, seeds	<b>E L-M</b>
Euphorbia (various), spurge (see note under 'Correct identification' in introduction)	<i>Euphorbia</i> spp	sap	<b>M-H T</b>
False acacia – see black locust			
False jasmine, yellow jasmine	<i>Gelsemium</i> spp	all, including nectar	<b>E M-H S</b>
Fishtail palm	<i>Caryota mitis</i>	fruit	<b>H T</b>
Flame tree – see brachychiton			
Foxglove	<i>Digitalis purpurea</i>	all	<b>E H S</b>
Frangipani	<i>Plumeria</i> spp	sap	<b>L-M T</b>
Fritillaria, snake's head fritillary	<i>Fritillaria meleagris</i>	bulb	<b>E L-M</b>
Fruit salad plant, Swiss cheese plant	<i>Monstera deliciosa</i>	unripe fruit	<b>E L-M</b>
Gleditsia, honey locust	<i>Gleditsia triacanthos</i>	all	<b>E L-M S</b>

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Common name/s	Botanical name	Harmful parts	Rating
Gloriosa lily, glory vine	<i>Gloriosa superba</i>	all, especially root	E H S
Golden chain tree, laburnum	<i>Laburnum anagyroides</i>	all, especially seeds	E L-M
Granny's bonnets – see aquilegia			
Grevillea, especially cultivar 'Robyn Gordon'	<i>Grevillea</i> spp	all	L-M T
Hellebore	<i>Helleborus</i> spp and cultivars	all	E H
Hemlock	<i>Conium maculatum</i>	all	E H
Holly	<i>Ilex aquifolium</i>	fruit	E L-M
Honey locust – see gleditsia			
Horse chestnut	<i>Aesculus</i> spp	fruit	E L-M
Hoya, wax flower	<i>Hoya australis</i>	leaves	E L-M S
Hyacinth	<i>Hyacinthus orientalis</i>	all, especially bulb	L-M S T
Italian arum - see cuckoo pint			
Iris	<i>Iris</i> spp	leaves, bulbs, root	L-M T
Japanese pepper tree - see Brazilian pepper tree - (see also pepper tree)			
Japanese spindle – see euonymus			



Golden chain tree



Hemlock



Hyacinth

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Lantana



Lily of the valley



Lupin

Common name/s	Botanical name	Harmful parts	Rating
Jerusalem cherry, ornamental chilli	<i>Solanum pseudocapsicum</i>	fruit	<b>E H S</b>
Jessamine - see cestrum			
Jonquil – see daffodil			
Juniper	<i>Juniperus</i> spp	leaves, fleshy cones	<b>E L-M T</b>
Khat – see catha			
Kurrajong – see brachychiton			
Laburnum - see golden chain tree			
Lantana	<i>Lantana</i> spp	fruit, thorns	<b>E L-M S T</b>
Larkspur – see delphinium			
Lily of the Nile – see agapanthus			
Lily of the valley	<i>Convallaria majalis</i>	all	<b>E L-M</b>
Lobelia (see also cardinal flower)	<i>Lobelia</i> spp	all	<b>E L-M S</b>
Loquat	<i>Eriobotrya japonica</i>	seeds	<b>E H S</b>
Lupin	<i>Lupinus</i> spp	seeds	<b>E H S</b>
Marguerite (and Shasta daisy)	<i>Argyranthemum</i> hybrids	all	<b>L-M T</b>
Monkshood – see aconite			

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Common name/s	Botanical name	Harmful parts	Rating
Milkweed – see asclepias			
Moreton Bay chestnut - see black bean			
Morning glory	<i>Ipomea</i> spp	seeds	<b>E H S</b>
Naked ladies - see belladonna lily			
Naked lady, pencil bush	<i>Euphorbia tirucalli</i>	sap	<b>H T</b>
Narrow leaf cotton bush, swan plant	<i>Gomphocarpus fruticosus</i>	Pods	<b>L-M T</b>
Nerine	<i>Nerine</i> spp	sap	<b>L-M T</b>
Nettle, stinging nettle	<i>Urtica</i> spp	hairs on leaves	<b>L-M T</b>
Nicotiana	<i>Nicotiana tabacum</i>	all	<b>E L-M</b>
Oleander (see also yellow oleander)	<i>Nerium oleander</i>	all	<b>E H S</b>
Ornamental chilli – see Jerusalem cherry			
Ornithogalum – see chinchinchee			
Pampas grass	<i>Cortaderia selloana</i>	leaves	<b>H T</b>
Paterson's curse	<i>Echium plantagineum</i>	all	<b>E L-M S T</b>
Peace lily, spathiphyllum	<i>Spathiphyllum</i> spp	all	<b>E L-M T</b>



Naked lady



Nettle



Oleander

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Poinsettia



Primrose



Rhus

Common name/s	Botanical name	Harmful parts	Rating
Peach	<i>Prunus persica</i>	kernel, flowers, leaves, bark	E L-M
Pencil bush - see naked lady			
Pepper tree	<i>Schinus molle</i>	fruit	E L-M
Philodendron	<i>Philodendron</i> spp	all	E L-M
Pieris	<i>Pieris japonica</i>	leaves, nectar	E H S
Pigeon berry - see duranta			
Plumbago	<i>Plumbago</i> spp	sap	L-M T
Poinsettia	<i>Euphorbia pulcherrima</i>	leaves, sap	L-M T
Potato	<i>Solanum tuberosum</i>	all green parts, especially green skin	E H S
Primrose, primula	<i>Primula</i> spp	all	L-M T
Privet	<i>Ligustrum</i> spp	all, especially berries	E L-M
Rhododendron - see azalea			
Rhubarb	<i>Rheum rhaponticum</i>	leaves	E L-M
Rhus, scarlet rhus	<i>Rhus</i> spp	all	H T
Robinia - see black locust			

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Common name/s	Botanical name	Harmful parts	Rating
Rudbeckia	<i>Rudbeckia hirta</i>	all	L-M T
Rue	<i>Ruta graveolens</i>	all	E L-M T
Scarlet rhus - see rhus			
Shasta daisy - see marguerite			
Snake's head fritillary - see fritillaria			
Spathiphyllum - see peace lily			
Spindle tree - see euonymus			
Spurge - see euphorbia			
Stinging nettle - see nettle			
Swan plant - see narrow leaf cotton bush			
Swiss cheese plant - see fruit salad plant			
Tansy	<i>Tanacetum vulgare</i>	leaves, flowers	E L-M
Taro - see elephant's ear			
Toadstools	<i>Amanita</i> spp and many other genera	all	E H
Tomato	<i>Lycopersicon esculentum</i>	all green parts	E H S



Robinia



Spurge



Swan plant

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Tree of heaven



Virginia creeper



Wisteria

Common name/s	Botanical name	Harmful parts	Rating
Travellers' joy - see clematis			
Tree of heaven	<i>Ailanthus altissima</i>	sap	L-M T
Tung-oil tree	<i>Vernicia fordii</i>	all, especially seeds	E H S
Virginia creeper	<i>Parthenocissus quinquefolia</i>	fruit, leaves	E L-M
Waxflower - see hoyo			
White cedar - see cape lilac			
Wintersweet - see bushman's poison			
Wisteria	<i>Wisteria</i> spp	seeds, pods	E H S
Wormwood	<i>Artemisia</i> spp	all	E M-H T S
Yellow jasmine - see false jasmine			
Yellow oleander (see also oleander)	<i>Cascabela thevetia</i>	all, especially seed in kernel	E H S
Yesterday, today and tomorrow	<i>Brunsfelsia</i> spp	seeds	E L-M S
Yew	<i>Taxus baccata</i>	seeds, leaves	E H S
Zamia	<i>Macrozamia</i> spp	seeds, leaves	E L-M S

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### **Further reading**

Shepherd, RCH (2004). Pretty but poisonous, RG and FJ Richardson, Melbourne, 202pp.

Photographs courtesy of R.G. and FJ. Richardson, from the book 'Pretty but Poisonous.

Plants Poisonous to People - An Illustrated Guide for Australia' by R.C.H. Shepherd which is available from R.G. and FJ. Richardson,

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