

VICTOR HARBOR AND GOOLWA VETERINARY SERVICES

TALKING ANIMALS ~ TOXIC PLANTS

There are some plants that you would not think about in terms of risk, but which can be dangerous to animals. The pine needles of a Christmas tree can be a problem if a cat swallows one, because it may puncture the intestines and end up in the organs. The berries of holly are poisonous. About twenty berries can kill a large dog. The toxin is ilicine which can cause vomiting, diarrhoea and narcosis. If you have a dog that chews decorations, it may be advisable to use plastic holly instead. Poinsettias have poisonous leaves, sap and stems and cause gastrointestinal blistering and ulceration. Mistletoe is another plant seen at Christmas in some parts of the world. All parts of it are dangerous, causing gastrointestinal irritation and slowing of the heart rate.

Other normal indoor plants of concern are elephant ears and lilies. Elephant ears contain oxalates which can cause severe irritation of the mucous membranes and the digestive tract. Tiger lilies have a component that damages the kidneys. There was a cause of poisoning reported in a 12 week old kitten that chewed on some tiger lilies on a bouquet delivered to the owner's house. Other lilies have different chemicals that act in different ways.

One of the common dangerous garden bushes is the oleander. Reports of poisoning are more common with larger animals looking for things to browse. A few leaves can kill a horse. Cattle have died after leaves fell into their drinking water. Horses and cattle would usually be unlikely to eat such plants if they had plenty of grazing available, so it is more risky in times of drought. The risk for dogs would be greater in young pups that tend to chew things, especially bits of flowers and twigs that fall onto the ground. One of the ingredients in oleanders is a chemical like digitalis that affects the heart. It also caused gastroenteritis with vomiting and diarrhoea. Generally poisoning is rare because the plant tastes foul. Smoke from a burning oleander is toxic as well.

A lot of garden bulbs are toxic. Some of the most commonly mentioned ones are the narcissus, daffodils, jonquils, blue bells and snow drops. They contain alkaloid chemicals. An alkaloid is a nitrogen-containing organic compound. Consumption produces gastrointestinal signs such as vomiting and diarrhoea, but eventually the central nervous system is affected. In Holland during the Second World War the farmers ran out of cattle feed. They tried to supplement with the bulbs of tulips, hyacinths and narcissus and stems of gladioli, with disastrous consequences. The arum lily with the green foliage and large white trumpet-shaped flower is poisonous through the entire plant and causes severe vomiting which can lead to shock.

Some vegetable plants may be toxic. The leaves of rhubarb contain oxalic acid which crystallises in the kidneys and elsewhere, destroying the tissue structure. Horseradish has poisoned horses, cattle and pigs in England. It irritated their gastrointestinal tracts so much that they succumbed to exhaustion afterwards. The plant has a nasty taste and such an event is rare. Brussel sprouts have caused problems in cattle when the plants had been adversely affected by frosts. This stressed the plants and may have caused an increase in certain chemicals that were not present in healthy plants. Green or rotting potatoes contain an alkaloid called solanine which is toxic.

Cyanide is present in the kernels of various stone fruits such as almonds, apricots, cherries and plums and also in apple seeds. A human would have to eat about ten apricot kernels to have problems, but as most dogs are smaller than humans fewer than ten may be dangerous.

Toadstools are poisonous mushrooms. One very toxic species of toadstool in Australia is the Amanita species. This causes vomiting, diarrhoea and abdominal pain and can damage the liver and kidneys. Poisoning is mostly seen in dogs or puppies. Affected animals may appear to recover when intravenous fluids, but delayed signs occur due to secondary failure of the liver and kidneys. Compost heaps are sources of fungi which may be inhaled or eaten, causing respiratory or gastrointestinal problems. The organisms can develop very quickly in mounds of lawn clippings. Lawn clipping produce warmth as they degenerate and this makes an ideal environment for the growth of contaminants.