

Protecting Your Pet

[Gardening by the Yard : Episode GBY-909](#)

Could you unknowingly be putting your pets at risk by growing certain species of plants? The greatest risks to your pet's health is being poisoned in the one place your pet is supposed to be safest--at home. Indoors, keeping a pet safe is a lot like child-proofing everything. And those same sorts of precautionary measures need to be taken in the yard as well. The key to prudent plant choices is knowing what to look for.

Dr. Birgit Puschner, a lifelong gardener and pet lover, says the greatest danger for animals is often the most surprising to humans. For example, what do oleanders (**figure A**), yews (**figure B**) and begonias (**figure C**) have in common? They all make great landscape plants, unless you're a really inquisitive pet who chews on everything. These plants can be dangerous, even deadly to animals, and all too often, owners won't even know there's a problem until it's too late. "Unfortunately, I think [owners] find out after the fact," says Puschner.

So if Fido and fauna don't mix, does that mean you shouldn't grow potentially dangerous plants? Dr. Puschner recommends a less restrictive approach: watch young pets carefully as they explore and discourage or control behaviors that could be dangerous. And that can mean either making sure that a puppy doesn't have access to a dangerous plant or getting rid of the plant altogether.

"Puppies and kittens chew on things as they explore their environment, and especially when their teeth are changing, they might just grab anything possible and chew on it," says Puschner. And if that puppy or kitten chooses to chew on a plant like oleander--which, incidentally, grows all over California and is surprisingly toxic to animals as well as humans--they could get into real trouble, because all parts of an oleander are toxic, including the leaves, stems, roots and even the flowers (**figure D**).

But oleanders aren't the only plants that pose a risk to animals. The leaves of rhubarb can cause organ damage. The Japanese yew (*Taxus cuspidata*) can cause heart problems, and plants that



To a dog, the landscape is a smorgasbord of delightful things to sample. If your dog loves to chew--and what dog doesn't?--make sure he doesn't have access to poisonous plants.



Figure A



Figure B



Figure D

have strong fragrances such as eucalyptus and bay laurel (*Laurus nobilis*) can cause an upset stomach if ingested in large enough quantities.

And if you think there are lots of poisonous plants outdoors, you might be surprised to learn just how many common houseplants are toxic, too. "For indoor plants, philodendron and dieffenbachia are on the list; they can cause a lot of problems, especially in cats," warns Dr. Puschner. Even lilies, including tiger lilies and Easter lilies, may pose a threat to your unsuspecting pet. And, depending on the climate zone where you live, these may be plants you keep outdoors as well.

Other safety tips

- Move your animals out of the way before you spray and until the pesticide dries. Your pet could lick off the spray you put on the roses, and that could be a problem.
- Consider how you store your fertilizer. Is it out and readily accessible (**figure E**)? That's fine, until one of your pets gets into the bag and decides to have a little snack, which can result in stomach problems such as diarrhea and vomiting. So keep dangerous materials such as fertilizers out of reach.
- Beware of using snail bait--the kind with metaldehyde as the active ingredient. Many formulations look like dog pellets, which are a sure magnet for hungry hounds, but metaldehyde can cause vomiting or labored breathing in your pet.



Figure E

All of this information is not meant to make you panic, or rid your home and garden of all your plants and gardening supplies. It's simply a reminder to read all labels before using any garden-related products, and be sure to watch your pet carefully. If you notice anything strange about his or her behavior and you think it might be poison-related, call your vet immediately. If you have to take your pet to the vet, take either the product with you, or in the case of a plant, grab a twig of the plant in question and take that along as well.

Keep in mind that just this little bit of extra attention can help your furry friends from getting in harm's way. If you want more information on what plants and garden products pose threats to your family's pets, contact your vet for a comprehensive list. After all, keeping our precious pets safe is very important.

Poisonous plants

The following plants are toxic to pets (exceptions noted) and humans. If a vulnerable species isn't listed, consider the plant toxic to all animals.

- Azalea, laurels and rhododendron. All parts of the plant are considered moderately to extremely toxic.
- Black locust. All parts. Moderate to highly toxic; most problematic for horses.
- Bleeding heart. Toxic to cats.
- Bulbs: hyacinth, narcissus, daffodil. Very toxic.
- Christmas rose (*Helleborus niger*). All parts of the plant are poisonous.
- Castorbean. The seeds are highly toxic.
- Daphne. Berries are extremely toxic.
- Dieffenbachia. Moderately to highly toxic.
- Dogbane. Rhizomes are poisonous.
- Elephant ear. Moderately to highly toxic.
- Easter lily. Highly toxic to cats.
- Foxglove. Leaves are highly toxic.
- Golden chain (*Laburnum anagyroides*). All parts toxic, especially to dogs, horses, humans.
- Jasmine. Berries are extremely toxic.
- Lantana. Berries are poisonous.
- Larkspur. Moderately to highly toxic, especially the young plants and seeds.
- Lily of the valley. Both leaves and flowers are moderate to highly toxic.
- Mistletoe. Berries are extremely toxic.
- Monkshood. Roots are moderately toxic. Causes digestive upset and anxiety.
- Oleander. Highly toxic, especially to dogs, goats and horses.
- Poison hemlock. All parts are toxic.
- Red maple. Very toxic, only to horses.
- Rhubarb. Leaf blades are highly toxic.
- Water hemlock. All parts of the plant are poisonous.
- White snakeroot. All parts are poisonous, especially to dogs, horses, rabbits.
- Wild and domestic cherry. Leaves and stems are highly toxic.
- Wisteria. Seeds and pods cause mild to severe gastrointestinal reactions.
- Yew. Foliage and berries are both extremely toxic.