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Spring and Summer Gardening Hazards



JEN REEDER

"It's garden season!" declares Melinda Myers, a gardening expert who is the host of "Melinda's Garden Moments," which airs on 50 network TV stations across the U.S., and author of over 20 gardening books, including *Can't Miss: Small Space Gardening*.

This spring and summer when you get outside and start your gardening and landscaping projects, she urges you to steer away from toxic plants that could be dangerous for your pets. Years ago when she helped a friend landscape her yard, her pal's Golden Retriever ate everything they'd planted within a week.

"Luckily the dog was fine, but the landscaping was in bad shape," she recalls with a chuckle. "That gave me a totally different perspective on poisonous plants and landscaping."

Myers suggests that when gardeners plan their planting projects, they review the comprehensive lists of plants that are toxic for cats, dogs and horses at the ASPCA's website (www.aspca.org). Some of the most widely used spring and summer plants that are potentially dangerous for pets include:

1. English Ivy.

This Old World vine with lobed evergreen leaves and black, berrylike fruit is popular indoors as a houseplant and outside as a ground plant or in containers. But, it is toxic to pets, leading to abdominal pain, drooling, vomiting and diarrhea. As Myers says, "You'll have a mess to clean up."

2. Azaleas.

These colorful, flowering shrubs are a favorite of gardeners in spring, and are also popular gift plants. But ingestion of just a few leaves can cause serious problems, including vomiting, diarrhea, weakness, drooling and in severe cases, even coma and death. As with any time you suspect your pet has ingested a poisonous plant, call your veterinarian immediately.

3. Yew.

This common evergreen with needle-like leaves has a toxin that causes trembling, lack of coordination, and difficulty breathing. It can also cause significant gastrointestinal irritation and cardiac failure, which can result in death. Its effects extend beyond dogs and cats: "People who have horses are used to not having yew near their stables," Myers says.

4. Castor Bean.

This seed of the castor oil plant is very toxic not just for pets but humans as well, causing severe abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhea, seizures, coma and death. "One seed can kill a small child," Myers warns.

5. Lilies.

These fragrant Easter favorites are highly toxic to cats; even ingestion of a small amount can lead to severe kidney damage. Because Myers has three cats who love to "chow down" on plants in her home, if someone gives her a lily, she locks it away in a room where Roma, Max and Frankie can't reach it.

6. Tulip and daffodil bulbs.

Be careful to keep these perennial bulbs out of reach of your pets, as they can cause intense gastrointestinal irritation, drooling, loss of appetite, depression of the central nervous system, convulsions and cardiac abnormalities. The plants themselves are safe, so once the bulbs are in the ground it should be fine – unless your dog digs them up.

Plants aren't the only part of gardening that can harm your pet. For example, Myers suggests dog owners steer clear of cocoa bean shell mulch, which is popular with gardeners who want to conserve moisture and suppress weeds. But since it is made from the husk of cocoa beans, and chocolate is toxic to dogs (vomiting and muscle tremors are symptoms), other mulching options such as shredded leaves, straw or pine needles should be used instead.

Pesticides are poisonous and should be stored away from pets. Eco-friendly alternatives include corn gluten meal, which prevents weed seeds from germinating, and insecticidal soap, which kills pests but "not the good bugs that eat the bad bugs," according to Myers.

She also suggests alternatives to slug baits, "which are among the most toxic things on the market." Some options include products with iron phosphate, such as Sluggo or Escar-Go! The traditional method of placing beer in a saucer can be effective, but far from ideal if your dog or cat decides to eat the slugs and drink the beer – which can happen!

Ultimately, by familiarizing yourself with the plants and gardening products that are harmful with pets, you'll be able to beautify your home and property safely.

"It is possible to have a beautiful landscape that both you and your pets can enjoy," Myers says. "As a pet owner, you don't want to tempt them. We all want to be responsible."

Freelance journalist Jen Reeder used to get gardening help from her calico cat Pretzel, who also liked digging holes.

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