

Beware: plants that are poisonous to pets

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Did you know that those showy, fragrant lilies so popular as cut flowers are highly toxic to cats? Some florists routinely warn buyers but most don't. For all pet owners, it's worth knowing which plants in homes and gardens pose a threat.

There are hundreds of common plants that can cause mild to moderate problems for pets, but some are fatal in tiny amounts. Lilies are a good example, and include not just the highly scented Oriental lilies, but tiger, gloriosa, Easter and November lilies, all botanically *Lilium*. All parts are toxic to cats – even licking the pollen off their fur can poison them and possibly the vase water can too.

In the garden, it may be the berries and fruits that carry the most risk of being chewed, whether from boredom, curiosity or hunger. The fragrant shrub Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow (*Brunfelsia*) has purple to white flowers but the toxic berries are particularly attractive to dogs, as are *Nandina* and *Duranta* berries. The large red seeds of cycads are highly toxic; so too grapes and the kernels of apricots and almonds.

Bulbs might look to a dog like a ball to play with but most flowering bulbs – including daffodils, jonquils, tulips, cyclamen, nerines and the onion family – are moderately toxic. Autumn crocus (*Zephyranthes*) bulbs are highly toxic to cats and dogs.

Other common garden plants that are toxic if consumed are arum and calla lilies (*Zantedeschia*), rhododendrons and azaleas, foxgloves, daphne, rhubarb leaves, delphiniums, jasmine, amaranth, laburnum, oleander, and the weed lantana. Hydrangeas, box, ivy, and the seeds, unripe flesh and leaves of avocado are also moderately toxic.

While houseplants have proven benefits for improving air quality and human wellbeing, some carry risks for pets. These include devil's ivy or pothos (*Epipremnum*), *Dieffenbachia* (whose common name "dumb cane" refers to its effect of swelling the mouth and throat if eaten by humans), *dracaenas*, philodendrons, peace lilies (*Spathiphyllum*) and rubber tree (*Ficus elastica*).

The Australian Animal Poisons Centre, which offers a free service to pet owners and a paid service to vets, reports that just over a quarter of its calls since it started six months ago have been about mushrooms and toadstools; this has prompted the centre to launch a mushroom identification service. Of the plants causing concern, the most common have so far included lilies, daffodils and jonquils, kalanchoes, cycads, philodendrons, devil's ivy, peace lilies and the popular succulent *Crassula ovata*. Spring will doubtless bring a new range of culprits.

In addition to poisonings, some plants cause skin allergies and rashes, such as the common weed "trad" (formerly called wandering jew) and other ornamental varieties of the *Tradescantia* genus.

The bottom line is that while most plants are not going to cause problems, it's worth identifying any potentially dangerous ones and monitoring your pet around them. It also helps if you know the names of plants you grow. And you probably should not buy lilies as cut flowers if there's a cat in the household.

Good to know

Poisonous2pets by Nicole O'Kane is an excellent Australian reference book with colour photographs and descriptions of plants and their toxic parts, clearly flagged toxicity levels, details of symptoms and vital first-aid treatments. Australian Animal Poisons Centre free hotline 1300 869 738, operates 9am-7pm. See animalpoisons.com.au for emergency instructions.

Q&A

After spraying our lawn, the bindii is dead but the mongrel prickles are still on the surface. How do I remove them? *John Waring, Rockhampton, Qld*

You must treat bindii in winter when it emerges, before it flowers and produces the prickly seedpods in spring. Timing in your climate may vary. Once the prickles have formed, there's no easy way to remove them and their seeds will germinate next year. It may take a few years to clear it. Bindii favours compacted, poor and acidic soil, and lawns mown too short, so improving these conditions will help.

Can I regenerate my 30-year-old 'Bacon' avocado tree? It's 10m tall and fruited prolifically until five years ago. *Dennis Max, Melbourne*

Avocados are long-lived but have brittle wood. In spring, you can cut them back to bare branches, as they'll regrow from old wood. Newly exposed limbs are susceptible to sunburn, so

paint them with white, water-based paint for protection. You won't get fruit for a year or two. A less drastic approach is to progressively prune a few main branches each year. Trace element deficiencies, particularly zinc and boron, can affect fruiting.

Why do my hippeastrum bulbs flower well some years and poorly others? They're in pots in sun and moved under cover in winter. *Dulcie Mahoney, Hobart*

These flamboyant bulbs revel in sun and do well in pots when kept warm and dry in winter. To develop the next year's flowers, it's important to feed them liquid fertiliser and Seasol fortnightly from flowering until the leaves die down. Add slow release fertiliser in spring. Mealybug infestations can also disrupt flowering; use Eco-Neem.

Send your questions to: helenyoungtwig@gmail.com or PO Box 3098, Willoughby North, NSW 2068. Website: helenyoung.com.au. The best question for July wins a Bokashi One Starter Pack worth \$196 for hygienic composting in the kitchen; bokashi.com.au. June's winner is Alysha Lavelle of Towradgi, NSW, for her question about curl grubs.

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