

Garden Safety With Children

There is a lovely area called Magnolia which borders the edge of downtown Seattle. In the center of Magnolia, just outside what the locals call the “village,” there is a winding path above the bay that follows the curves of the waters edge below. On one side of the path, a view of the bay can be seen. On the other side are formal and semi-formal gardens. This is where I spent a summer, caring for a delightful 3 year old girl. Alexandra and I spent time walking, talking and playing a game we made up called, “name that flower.”

By the time “Allie” was 4 years old, she could proudly name 16 or 17 different kinds of flowers. She persistently challenged me with her blazing questions, wanting answers that were never quite good enough. If I was unable to break down an answer into bite size pieces adapted just for her, she would badger me until I got it right..

If you have young children or grandchildren, you might consider them when you plan your garden. A garden that is child friendly is a garden that is, “learning friendly.” Know your plants, flowers and shrubs. Call them by name. No, you don’t have to use the botanical names; using the common name is a good place to begin! It’s especially important to know something about the plant, after-all, there are several common plants in our local area, that are poisonous.

In either country or urban settings, it is essential to identify poisonous plants, especially with children’s safety in mind. Many of our common lilies are poisonous. Identify the toxic berries of the common Lantana, the long spikes of the Foxglove, the white flowers of the Jimson weed, the stinging leaves of the nettle, or very hot varieties of edible peppers that can burn skin or eyes. Show children the long hidden thorns of the Bouganvillea and reveal why they need to be careful. Let them know that just a few leaves of the Oleander bush seen here along our local highways and roadways, can make animals (and people) sick, or possibly die. The red ones, incidentally, are more toxic than the white. For very young children, its is best not to have any toxic plants in the garden, or home, until you can be assured of his or her safety.

In addition to providing children, with a place they can play safely, a well-designed and well-used garden will instill a love of plants and gardening. Part of their education should be to learn about harmful plants as well as safe or edible plants. As we learn about our own surroundings, the children close to us learn too.

To help you identify some poisonous plants, I am providing a partial list of plants found locally. For a more extensive list toxic and safe plants, including botanical names, see <http://envhort.ucdavis.edu/ce/king/> or www.calpoison.org. In case of emergency call CA. Poison Control System at 1-800-876-4766 or (1-800-8-POISON) Some recommended books are Human Poisoning from Native and Cultivated Plants and Poisonous Plants of California. Additionally, the Agricultural Extension office in Madera and Fresno distributes an informative brochure on Toxic and Safe plants.

A few common plants on the toxic list are: Amaryllis, Anemone, Angel's Trumpet, Begonia, Belladonna, Buttercup, Cala lilly, Castor bean, Clematis, Daffodil bulb, Delphinium, Daisy, Iris, English Ivy, Lobelia, Mistletoe, Pampas grass, the green parts of a potato plant, Pokeweed, Rhubarb leaves, Sweet Peas, Tree Tobacco, Tulips, Western Water hemlock, Wisteria, English Yew.

Ramona Frances of Madera is a University of California Master Gardener. She can be contacted by e-mail at garden@psnw.com. This column is provided by the University Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Program in Madera County. The Master Gardener program extends research based information in home horticulture and pest management, verified by University of California experts to the citizens of our state. Call you U.C. Cooperative Extension Office in Madera with your gardening questions at 559-675-7879 Ext.204 to leave a msg, or stop by the office on Mondays from 1:00 - 3:00 p.m. to speak to a Master Gardener in person.