Toxic Plants and Pets

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All of us have heard anecdotes about pets poisoned by toxic plants in the landscape but it is difficult to extract any solid numbers about actual poisonings that occur. If your experiences have been like mine with pets and plants, it is easy to dismiss the reports as blaming plants for problems caused by other issues. In a lifetime of raising dogs with free range in heavily planted landscapes I have never experienced a problem caused by toxic plants.

Based on other evidence, however, the issue of the threat of toxic plants to pets is real and of great interest to many pet owners.

The webmaster of plantanswers.com reports that the topic “Toxic Plants” is consistently in the top ten of subject searches on the popular website.

San Antonio veterinarian Dr. Lewis Radicke confirms that the threat from toxic plants is real. The numbers of incidents caused by toxic plants is not as high as problems caused by other types of accidents or diseases, but it is common, especially on a seasonal basis for pets in his practice to be injured by toxic plants such as sago palm seeds, lantana foliage, castor beans, mushrooms and oleander.

Here are some conclusions and recommendations to review when you consider the threat of toxic plants to your pets, and actions to take to reduce the threat.

Conclusions about the Toxic Plant Threat

* There are lots of plants that have some degree of toxicity to pets but most are not a threat except in extreme cases of allergy or unusual consumption.
* Most pets avoid plants with toxicity because of smell, taste, or texture.
* Some shapes can be attractive to pets and raise the likelihood of consumption as a problem. The round smooth shape of sago palm seeds is an example. Berries are attractive to some pets. Some pets will chew sticks without discriminating between toxic and non-toxic branches.
* Owners of pets show a high interest in toxic plants because it is a potential cause of illness in which the pet owner can intervene to protect the pet.
* A large percentage of pets live in environments with a number of toxic plants without ever consuming enough to have any type of problem.

Recommendations to Help Prevent Poisoning From Toxic Plants

* Consider removing, or at least reducing the threat of individual plants that cause the most poisonings in the San Antonio area.

1. Castor beans- Remove them from areas where pets have access. The plants may naturalize and the seeds are a long term threat.
2. Sago palm – Seed production is rare. The round shape and smooth soft skin of the seeds, makes the seeds a threat to pets that like to play with balls. Cut out the reproductive growth and/or remove the seeds before they mature.
3. Lantana - If dogs or other pets show any inclination to consume the leaves as they do with grass or hackberry leaves to serve as a stomach purge. It may be best to remove the plants. Based on the large number of lantanas in area landscapes and small number of poisonings, it is an unusual occurrence.
4. Mushrooms- Most of the time pets pass up mushrooms but the safest strategy may be to keep your eyes open for mushroom “bloom” and quickly remove it with a shovel. Most mushrooms sprout in the spring or summer after wet weather.
5. Mistletoe- Place stems and berries that fall off of trees in the garbage. A walk by trees with the plants after windy and rainy days will usually do the job. It is ironic that the “poisonous” mistletoe berries are a favorite bird food.
6. Oleander- Only use the plants in parts of the landscape that aren’t frequented by dogs that have shown an inclination to chew stiff stems or sticks.
7. Paperwhite and Daffodil Bulbs- According to the internet the bulbs are a threat if your pets chew them from packages or fresh plantings. Keep the packages of bulbs out of the pets’ reach and cover the new planting with mulch or wire to discourage digging them up. Dr. Radicke does not believe the species are common enough in area landscapes to be a large-scale poisoning threat.
8. Texas Mountain Laurel – The seeds are poisonous and common but they are also small and very hard-shelled. Dr. Radicke reports that the few seeds consumed usually pass through the digestive system in tact with no noticeable impact on the pet.

* Make chewing plant material one of your targets in obedience training. Encourage pets to chew toys or only sticks you select.
* Puppies and kittens are most vulnerable, so do your best to watch them when they operate in a new landscape or around toxic plants. To reassure yourself with a pet that seems attracted to a particular plant, search for the plant on the internet to determine its toxicity. If the plant is identified as a problem, take one or more of the action steps above.

Emergency Response If Poisoning Appears to Have Occurred

* Identify the plant suspected of causing the symptoms and be prepared to clearly describe the symptoms.
* Contact your Vet or the Poison Hotline at 855-213-6680 for treatment instructions prior to any treatment.