

Poison Gardens

- A Trick or a Treat?

By Nora Fellows,
Bexar County Master Gardener

Enter if you dare! This is the season that we see those words popping up on doors and houses everywhere. But how about a garden? Certainly not there! A garden is a place of beauty and serenity – a relaxing spot for our hurried days.



Alnwick Poison Garden gate. Photo: Jiri Vondrous, Shutterstock

But sometimes a garden can be filled with dangerous beauties that can be used for nefarious, healing, or educational purposes! The Alnwick Poison Garden, located in Northwest England, was created for just that purpose. Or at least the purpose of showcasing all types of poisonous plants. As part of the larger Alnwick Gardens acreage, the separated poison garden is the creation of the Duchess of Northumberland. Created in 2005, its mission is to educate visitors about poisonous plants and the evolution of medicinal plants. The garden itself is settled behind forbidding iron gates and access is allowed only through guided tours. However, Alnwick Garden is not the only poison garden you can visit. Not to be outdone, Ireland boasts a poison garden at Blarney Castle.

*Poisons derived from plants have been used for millennium. They were used to increase the lethality of weapons, like poison on the tip of a spear, when hunting prey. Even today in South America, **Curare**, a poisonous compound derived from bark is still used in arrows and blow darts to paralyze prey. Interestingly, a compound from the **curare vine** is also used as a muscle relaxer.*

*Poisonous plants have a long history of being used in assassinations and executions. Poison was an accepted method of execution for the ancient Greeks and famously, Socrates was said to drink his own death sentence by ingesting a drink made from **hemlock**. Even in modern times, plant derived poisons have been used for assassinations. One of the most recent was in 1978, when Georgi Markov, a Bulgarian dissident, was poisoned with ricin that had been compressed into a small capsule and injected into his leg. Ricin, a deadly toxin, is a compound*

*found in the **castor bean plant** seed. Yes, the seed of the same plant you may have growing in your garden is today classified as a Category B bioterrorism agent.*



Castor Beans. Photo: Alexander Acevedo, Shutterstock

There is little evidence that a purely “poison garden”, such as Alnwick Poison Garden, existed in history. Instead, poisonous plants were a natural part of the broader apothecary or physic gardens.

There is, after all, often a fine line between harmful and helpful when it comes to plants.



Chelsea Physic Garden. Photo: Willy Barton, Shutterstock

Physic gardens were created to grow medicinal or healing plants and herbs. The Chelsea Physic Garden in London is probably the most renowned, but apothecary gardens, large and small, are found throughout the world. In these physic or healing gardens, you will find plants that can be used for good or for harm.

*The pretty **foxglove** plant is poisonous if eaten but was historically used as a medicinal plant for a number of ailments and is now the basis for the medication digitalis,*

which is used as a treatment for heart problems. There are numerous examples of poisonous plants being used for effective treatments.

*Both the **Pacific yew** and **periwinkle**, although poisonous, produce powerful compounds that are used in cancer treatments.*

*A common blood anti-coagulant was discovered through a series of twists and turns, from the deaths of cows in the 1920's who ate spoiled clover. **Clover**, among other plants, was found to contain the compound coumarin that, when spoiled and moldy, converts to a toxin, dicoumarol. From there, it was developed and marketed as the rat killer, warfarin. And finally, after a series of chance events, it developed into the anticoagulant we use today. From accidental cow killer to intentional rat killer to human medicine.*

Depending on the plant, the toxicity level is variable and is influenced by a number of factors including when and what part of the plant is ingested or touched.

*Even some of our commonly consumed foods can be poisonous. Lovely **rhubarb** stems are edible, but the leaves are poisonous, and all parts of an **unripe pineapple** are poisonous.*

*Want to start your own poison garden? Well, you probably already have. Some of our favorite South Texas plants are poisons. Those ‘deer resistant’ plants like **oleander** and **yaupon holly** – yep, poisonous. Some, you recognize right away, like **bull nettle** and **poison ivy**. Others are a little less obvious such as **caladium**, **elephant ears**, **lantana**, **Carolina jasmine**, **datura** and **brugmansia**.*



Carolina Jasmine. Photo: Campwillowlake, Canva

As the days grow shorter and fall ushers in on cooler breezes, it's a perfect time to inventory your garden to identify any plants that may be toxic. Because many of these plants are an important part of our garden, we may not want to just get rid of them. Instead, consider formulating a plan that includes how to protect children/pets, addresses special handling requirements, and what actions to take in case of accidents. Then you can avoid the tricks and savor the treats of your garden.

Want to learn more? Check out these resources:

Centers for Disease Control (CDC): [Ricin](#)

[Alnwick Poison Garden](#)

[Chelsea Physic Garden](#)

[Poison Plants Revolutionize Medicine – Emory University](#)

[Texas Parks and Wildlife Medicinal Plants](#)

[Texas A&M AgriLife: Common Poisonous Plants and Plant Parts](#)

[Texas Poison Center Network](#)

[NPR: Welcome to the Poison Garden: Medicine's Medieval Roots](#)