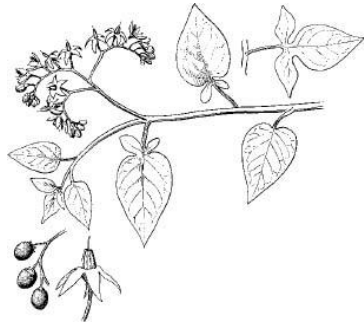


# All the Pretty Poisons (Rochester, NY)

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## **BEFORE WE BEGIN:**

1. This handout was intended as a workshop for Childcare workers who are responsible for removing poison plants near day care centers. With more children home this summer, it may be useful to parents.
2. I am using English names for plants rather than Latin since both can change over time, and English is easier to remember. The names are from Peterson's Guides, primarily, although I will tell you alternatives if I know them. That way, if you remember a name, you can look it up later.
3. This paper concentrates on common wild plants. There are also *many* poisonous garden plants.

## **A True Story**

I have been teaching a friend how to identify wild plants. A mom and her children showed up at my friend's door to show a large metal bowl full of beautiful "wild grapes" they had harvested. They were so happy about the wonderful grape jelly they were about to make. Since they were pokeweed berries, their whole family could have easily died! Luckily, my friend could show them real wild grapes and get everyone carefully cleaned up.

So how can we protect the children without getting carried away and destroying too many plants?

## **Through a Child's Eyes**

When deciding which plant to remove from the day care's property, think about which plants children are most likely to eat. Probably they will be the ones that look like a *food* that is familiar to them. Back in the days of snacks that were cookies or crackers, kids were less tempted by wild plants. Now that healthy snacks are common, there is more need to notice plants with berries or veggie-like structures. While adults will notice slight differences in plants, kids will look more at similarities in plants. Most kids do not just graze on the flowers although that can be a consideration in some cases.

Kids may also not know how various fruits and vegetables grow normally. For example: blueberries grow on a woody bush, pokeweed berries grow on a bright red plant. Most smooth berries in the Rochester area are poisonous. Berries that look like raspberries are mostly harmless, but kids may generalize that all berries are good for them.

## **Learn the Chief "Offenders" and How They Differ from Harmless Plants**

There are only a few common wild plants that are likely to be eaten:

- Bittersweet nightshade
- Pokeweed
- Everlasting pea
- Horse nettle

There are several plants that are even harmful to touch:

- Poison ivy
- Poison hemlock
- Giant hogweed (VERY rare in the city)



## Don't Get Carried Away!

Everyone wants their home and garden to be beautiful. Flowers and plants make a house look like a home. Yet some of those plants are also a danger.

Using toxic chemicals to kill “weeds” may be just as dangerous as having weeds around because they stay in soil for a long time. Weed killers such as Round Up are immensely toxic – and may cause allergies in addition to on-going health problems. They are also implicated in encouraging toxic algae growth in water.

In no way should all plants be removed. The idea is to remove highly dangerous plants that are also attractive to children.

But the bottom line is:

- Children need supervision, especially when outside.
- Teaching children to ask about eating anything from outside *before* actually eating it is the most important way to protect them from harm from accidentally ingesting poisons

## Researching

Check your information - a LOT! Use several sources. Beware especially of information found on the Internet; there's a lot of misinformation out there. I would suggest at least one reliable book source to compare with Internet information. In the end, it will come down to your confidence in a particular source or author. I like Peterson's Guides best because they have done extensive on-going research, and they have line drawings that highlight the specific feature that differentiates one plant from another. Photos of plants can be very misleading. This includes especially on-line photo apps. They are only approximately 30% effective and rely on other users' *guesses* as to the ID of the plant. Do not stake the lives of children on incomplete information.

## Bibliography

Foster, Steven and James A. Duke. A Field Guide to Medicinal Plants Eastern and Central North America. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990.

Foster, Steven and James A. Duke. A Field Guide to Medicinal Plants and Herbs of Eastern and Central North America (Second edition). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000.

**Note:** Because of the new photographic format which makes plant identification more difficult, it is a good idea to retain both of the resources on medicinal plants.

Peterson, Lee Allen. A Field Guide to Edible Wild Plants of Eastern/Central North America. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977.

Peterson, Roger Tory and Margaret McKenny. A Field Guide to Wildflowers of Northeastern and North-central North America. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968.

For me, this is the best resource for identifying plants. The line drawings clearly point out the specific features which differentiate one type of plant from another. Photographic texts, while decorative, show only one individual plant which may or may not resemble other plants of the same type.