



## PLANTS IN NEW ZEALAND POISONOUS TO PEOPLE

Many cultivated and wild plants are poisonous to people to some extent and often to animals as well. This poster includes those which have most often caused poisoning to people in New Zealand. There is no need to panic, for fatalities are extremely rare. Usually not enough of a plant is eaten, or the plant is not toxic enough, to cause serious danger. Thus, it is usually unnecessary to destroy poisonous garden plants, but it is important to identify correctly those plants that are a potential danger and to seek professional advice when poisoning is suspected.

Not everyone who feels ill after eating leaves, flowers, or berries has been poisoned; any failure to digest the plant may cause a stomach ache. It should also be noted that not all poisonous plants have a bitter or unpleasant taste. For the majority of the species listed, it is their berries and seeds that are most often eaten by children.

1. Yew (*Taxus baccata*). Cultivated throughout. Evergreen tree, often columnar (Irish Yew). All parts, except flesh of fruit, poisonous. Children poisoned by whole fruits and stock by foliage.

2. Tuta (*Coriaria arborea*). Widespread in and around scrub and forest. Native shrub or tree. All parts, except flesh of ripe fruit, very poisonous. Other *Coriaria* species also poisonous.

3. Oleander (*Nerium oleander*). Cultivated, especially in warmer and coastal areas. Evergreen shrub; leaves leathery; flowers white to crimson. All parts very poisonous.

4. Spindle tree (*Eurostyrium europaeum*). Widespread in cultivation, especially cooler areas. Deciduous shrub or small tree; flowers insignificant. All parts poisonous, but fruits most often eaten.

5. Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*). Widespread weed, especially cooler areas. Short-lived herb; leaves downy, not rough as in comfrey. All parts very poisonous.

6. Ngaiu (*Myoporum laetum*). Coastal as far south as Otago. Native tree or shrub; leaves with translucent dots. All parts toxic. Australian ngaiu is cultivated and also poisonous.

7. Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*). Widespread weed. Foetid biennial herb. All parts very poisonous. Confused with parsley and fennel but both these have yellow flowers, a pleasant scent, and lack purple markings on stems.

8. Giant hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*). Local, cultivated and wild. Giant biennial herb (only section of stem illustrated); flowers white. Produces severe dermatitis even after brief contact.

9. Rhododendron (*Rhododendron* 'Sir Robert Peel'). Widely cultivated. Dense evergreen shrub or small tree. All parts poisonous but flowers most often eaten. All rhododendrons should be regarded as poisonous.

10. Arum lily (*Zantedeschia aethiopica*). Throughout, cultivated and wild. Tufted evergreen herb; berries green or yellow. All parts cause burning sensation if eaten.

11. Lantana (*Lantana camara*). Warmer areas, cultivated and wild. Straggling evergreen shrub; leaves rough; flowers usually opening cream, sometimes yellow, changing to pink or crimson; berries blue-black. All parts poisonous; flower heads and fruits most often eaten.

12. Portugal laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*). Widespread, cultivated. Evergreen shrub or small tree. Contains cyanide compounds; chief danger is from eating the astringent, purplish black berries.

13. Laburnum (*Laburnum anagyroides*). Cultivated and wild, cooler areas. Small deciduous tree. All parts poisonous, but the black seeds most often eaten. The yellow seeds of kowhai are also toxic.

14. Bittersweet (*Solanum dulcamara*). Throughout, rarer southwards, shaded sites. Shrubby climbing weed. All parts poisonous.

15. Larkspur (*Consolida ambigua*). Throughout, cultivated. Annual herb; flowers also white or pink; seeds small, dark. All parts poisonous.

16. Jerusalem cherry (*Solanum pseudocapsicum*). Throughout, cultivated and wild. Small evergreen shrub; flowers white, star-like. Berries very poisonous. The similar *S. difflorum*, also known as Jerusalem cherry, is poisonous.

17. Stinking iris (*Iris foetidissima*). Widespread, cultivated and wild, especially cooler areas. Perennial herb forming patches. The poisonous orange fruits are sometimes eaten by children.

18. Cherry laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*). Throughout, wild and cultivated, often as a hedge. Shrub or small tree; fruits dark purple. All parts poisonous.

19. Caper spurge (*Euphorbia lathyris*). Throughout. Annual weedy herb. The large seeds are poisonous, and the milky sap may cause dermatitis.

20. Privet (*Ligustrum vulgare*). Mainly cooler areas, wild and cultivated, often as a hedge. Shrub or tree; flowers white, fragrant. Most parts poisonous but berries most often eaten. Other species are grown in warmer areas but have less attractive berries.

21. Angel's trumpet (*Brugmansia candida*). Cultivated in warmer areas. Large shrub; flowers night-scented. Poisoning mostly from flowers and leaves.

22. Lily of the valley (*Convallaria majalis*). Cultivated, mainly in cooler areas. Small perennial herb, forming patches; berries globose, orange-red. All parts poisonous.

23. Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*). Mainly cultivated in cooler parts of South Id. Deciduous shrub; flowers small, pink, tubular. Berries have caused poisoning. The native evergreen snowberry of the mountains (*Gaultheria*) has edible white to red fruit.

24. Tree nettle or ongaonga (*Urtica ferox*). Throughout, around scrub and forest. Native shrub. Contact with many stinging hairs is very dangerous. The small weedy annual nettle (*U. urens*) of cultivated ground is much less dangerous.

25. Italian arum (*Arum italicum*). Widespread, cultivated and wild, especially cooler areas. Tuberos, winter-grown, perennial herb. All parts cause burning sensation if eaten.

26. Winter rose (*Helleborus niger*, and hybrids). Widespread in cultivation, especially cooler areas. More or less deciduous, tufted, perennial herb. Flowers in winter. All parts poisonous.

27. Thornapple (*Datura stramonium*). Widespread weed, disturbed soils. Foetid annual herb; leaves large, membranous, lobed; flowers white, funnel-shaped. All parts poisonous.

28. Ivy (*Hedera helix*). Throughout, wild and cultivated. Evergreen climber; leaves leathery, very variable. Most parts poisonous but berries most often eaten.

29. Red cestrum (*Cestrum elegans*). Warmer areas, cultivated and wild. Foetid shrub; leaves softly downy. The scarlet-flowered *C. fasciculatum* 'Newellii' is often grown. Both are poisonous.

30. Corsican hellebore (*Helleborus lividus* subsp. *corsicus*). Commonly cultivated. Evergreen herb with stem; leaves tough. Flowers in winter and spring. All parts poisonous.

31. Castor oil plant (*Ricinus communis*). Mostly warmer areas, wild and cultivated. Soft-wooded shrub; leaves green or red. All parts poisonous, the seeds especially so.

32. Fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*). Widespread, under silver birch, pine, native beech. Toadstool, appearing late summer or autumn. Gills under cap white. All parts poisonous.

33. Cotonaster (*Cotonaster horizontalis*). Throughout, common, cultivated. Deciduous shrub, often trained against walls; flowers small, pink. Berries only mildly toxic but causing stomach upsets; other species are grown and have similar effects.

34. Death cap (*Amanita phalloides*). Mostly North Id, under oaks. Toadstool, appearing late summer and autumn. Deadly poisonous. Distinguished from mushrooms by white gills under cap and skirt near base of stalk.

Paul Brown Re 1985