

Please, Do Eat the Violets

Perhaps not daisies, but surely violets, nasturtiums, pansies, roses, daylilies, even the bright red flowers of scarlet runner beans and the blue blossoms of borage. You might want to taste the petals before adding them to the menu: the center of the flower may be bitter and the white or green area where the petal is attached may be bitter as well. We are talking about candied violets for the top of a cake, spicy bits added to a salad, not a stew of your dead-headed border. Just a nibble for the novelty of it.

A caution: if you are gathering squash to stuff for a company dish, give the cruising bees time to leave. They often nap in a hidden fold, unheard and unseen.

It is far better to be safe than sorry in this edible/non-edible debate. A recent speaker to the Gloucester Master Gardeners was Vickie Shufer, a Virginia Beach naturalist/publisher who is an expert in wild food foraging. To arm yourself with information about which plants are safe to eat and more specifically, how to make them safe and palatable, consult her web site: www.ecoimages-us.com.

Not only is it important to know the time of year when safe-to-eat plants are available but which parts are to be avoided. We are all familiar with the delicious green weeds, dandelion, wild cress, and purslane (*portulaca oleracea*). Purslane is a persistent weed so eating it in salad is one way of keeping it out of the rose bed. Rich in vitamins and omega-3 oils, it is pretty with its shiny curvy leaves and tastes crispy sweet/sour. Some ethnic dishes use it cooked but I've read it gets slippery, like okra, when stewed.

In olden times, before weed and seed and such, lawns were bright with dandelions and in small towns where dandelion wine was concocted in defiance of prohibition, strangers would neatly pluck the weeds from your lawn. Actually, harvested before they flower, they are a treat to eat.

Pokeweed, *phytolacca americana*, has tender young shoots that can be boiled to make poke 'salad' but the root is poisonous as are the stems as they age to red and the older leaves and berries. In boiling those early shoots, pour off the first two lots of boiling water and reboil – or just grow spinach? The 'salad' in poke salad comes from the Old English word 'sallet' meaning cooked greens.

Back to blossoms: avoid flowers of azalea, delphinium, foxglove, wisteria, hydrangea, lantana, lobelia, and oleander. And, despite its name, sweet pea is not for eating. You already know that daffodils, rhododendron, lily of the valley, crocus and Jack-in-the-pulpit are not safe to eat! Legend has it that Alexander the Great died after having been given a medicinal dose of hellebore. This lovely Lenten or Christmas rose is poisonous in all its parts which may explain why the deer leave it alone.

Occasionally Christmas gifts of Poinsettia are disparaged because the plant is dangerous. It is not! However, like most euphorbias (milkweeds and spurge) it has milky sap that will probably irritate your skin if carelessly handled.

You don't have to dine on plants to have them make you ill. Asthma sufferers can be made miserable by the pollen from several trees. One reason for seasonal allergies becoming more widespread is the preference for male trees and shrubs because the female plants make a mess by

dropping fruit. The most notable example is the Ginkgo biloba, the Maidenhair tree, whose female fruit has a nasty odor. On the other hand, the male trees dust the air with aggravating pollen for weeks.

Ragweed, neither tree nor shrub, but weed, is the worst offender, spewing pollen that can travel on the breeze for miles. When CO2 levels rise so does the release of pollen, alas. Even lawn grass can release pollen from small flowers so low the mower misses them. The most allergenic is Bermuda grass (cynodon dactylon). Fortunately newer cultivars of this species do not produce pollen. I do wonder how seed is produced if there is no pollen?

When considering the potential for harm in every charming garden, don't overreact and introduce papier mache' trees and plastic flowers. Just be sure you never chew on an un-vetted twig. Signs may help—'Please don't sample the vegetation'.

Other plants are more a liability than these non-edibles. Kudzu for example is expensive. Millions have been spent trying to extirpate it from the seven million acres it inhabits. At Ft.Pickett even tanks could not move it from the training fields. Oddly, it can be eaten: the leaves can be fried, the blossoms made into jelly, and the stems turned into salsa. Bon appetite!