

village view

by Andrea Leonard

In recent years many books and articles have been written about collecting and consuming wide edibles, and while the knowledgeable collector of wild foods certainly has advantages over those of us who can't qualify as botanists (they can save many a grocery dollar), the less well-informed may be taking serious chances experimenting with the unfamiliar.

We could even be taking serious chances eating parts of ordinary fruit and vegetable plants that contain poisons.

Eaten in large numbers, apple seeds can be fatal, for instance. Cherry, peach and prune pits, as well as twigs and foliage of these fruit trees, can cause shortness of breath, over-stimulation, and even prostration when chewed and swallowed.

Rhubarb leaves, if eaten in large amounts, can lead to convulsions, coma, followed rapidly by death, although cooking the succulent stalks with sugar makes an excellent and delicious sauce or relish, completely innocuous and richly nutritious.

Don't take chances, don't experiment, don't mistake rhubarb leaves for beet greens or spinach.

Even the common Irish potato can cause serious illness if any of the green parts are ingested. Cardiac depression, which can be fatal, may result. Like the green parts of potatoes, tomato foliage causes cardiac depression as well.

Growing all around us are beautiful green plants potentially dangerous to eat. Keep an eye on your children and be sure they don't put into their mouths any substance you aren't positive is harmless. Pay special attention to the toddler who's into everything and whose most acute sense of touch is located in his mouth.

All parts of azalea and rhododendron plants are poisonous; if eaten, they can produce nausea, difficulty in breathing and death. While this is no reason to tear out and destroy these handsome plants that probably are a part of your home landscaping, you'll want to be sure when you put a child outside in a playpen that the little one can't reach the plants' leaves.

The beautiful buttercup blooms in early summer, a wildflower admired by millions. It can cause paralysis if eaten, however. The bulbs of jonquils, daffodils and narcissus, if eaten, may result in acute gastrointestinal upsets. Store them where no one will possibly mistake them for food.

The foliage of foxglove as well as its seeds contain poisons that bring on irregular heartbeat, digestive upset and mental confusion.

Seeds of the horsechestnut and buckeye tree (these will mature in the fall the year) will inflame mucous membranes, induce stupor and may result in paralysis if eaten.

All parts of lily of the valley except its ripe fruits have an effect similar to consumption of foxglove foliage.

At Christmastime we should remember mistletoe berries can be fatal to either adults or children.

Eating morning glory seeds may cause death preceded by severe mental disturbances.

Wild mushrooms may taste marvelous, and many people gather them for table use, but no wild mushroom should ever be served or eaten, raw or cooked, unless the collector is absolutely positive of the mushroom's botanical identity. Even a small bite of the amanita, a beautiful white mushroom that looks delicious, smells and tastes excellent, can cause death.

Eating the seeds and pods of the wisteria vine is apt to result in digestive upset ranging from mild to severe, while all parts of iris cause acute gastrointestinal disturbance.

Seeds of Caston Bean plants are extremely poisonous, and eating only a few seeds can be fatal.

In addition to plants that may make you sick or kill you or a child- if eaten, the woods are full of plants very likely to cause severe skin irritations, itching, swelling and blistering.

Poison ivy and poison oak are found in nearly every natural woodland on Cape Cod, although poison oak is more apt to be encountered in wetlands.

When walking through woodlands, the wise person will avoid skin contact with unfamiliar plants. Learning to identify the plants is the best protection. Remember, too, household pets allowed to roam where poison ivy grows can infect their owners, even though the individuals have never seen the plants.

The oil from its leaves is the substance responsible for the skin eruptions, and a dog may come home from a romp

well-anointed with the oily deposit. Some of the worst cases of ivy poisoning have resulted when the plant was burned; the oil was carried in the smoke from the fire.

Don't burn poison ivy. Don't try to root it up or cut it out. If you suspect you've been exposed, scrub thoroughly with strong soap as soon as possible. If you do contract it, you'll recognize the symptoms by the severe itching, swelling of the affected area, and the lesions' tendency to weep. A physician's attention is highly recommended in all but the mildest cases of ivy poisoning.

These are but a few of the poison plants growing on Cape Cod. They all have their uses and help make the Cape a beautiful place. Even poison ivy has its beauty. In the fall the crimson and gold of its foliage adds to the glories of the autumn color. It won't hurt us if we steer clear of it.

Throughout the year, protect yourself and your loved ones from sickness and possible death by eating only fruits, vegetables and foliage you are positive will do you no harm.

The bitter taste or unpleasant flavor of some poisonous plants should, in some instances, be protection enough, but that can be misleading since some that taste quite good can be fatal. The mushroom amanita is a case in point.

Furthermore, there are numerous cases of children being poisoned every year by such liquids as lye, ammonia, insect repellent, and other dangerous substances. It may be hard to believe the smell and taste alone wouldn't be adequate protection against such unfortunate accidents, but the evidence indicates the opposite.

In the event your own better judgement fails, or a child gets into the rhubarb patch and eats leaves from the plant, call your family physician immediately or go to the hospital Emergency Room for treatment. Don't wait for symptoms to develop.

Knowing what kind of poisons he must deal with can help the doctor take counter-measures to save the life of the patient, so it's a good idea to bring along a sample of the plant or substance that was eaten. Should symptoms include breathing difficulty, irregular pulse, or severe gastrointestinal upset, you should suspect poisoning even if you have no idea of the cause.

Don't wait. Call the doctor. It could save a life.