

Helpline Hot Topic for November 2020

Holiday Plants Toxic to Pets

By Cynthia Zimmerman

“Oh, by gosh, by golly! It’s time for mistletoe and holly!”

1957 Christmas song recorded and co-written by Frank Sinatra, Hank Sanicola, Dok Stanford

During the holidays we bring special plants such as pines, firs, poinsettias, hollies, mistletoe, and amaryllis in to brighten our homes in decorating, celebrating, and gift-giving. Their beauty is such that at times we forget there can be some negatives in the use of plants particularly in regard to pets. Often we hear claims about the highly toxic and poisonous nature of certain holiday plants, causing us to turn to artificial alternatives, though we’d love to have the real thing. I discovered years ago that poinsettia isn’t as deadly as I’d been led to believe. My cat consumed, while I was at work, an entire poinsettia except for the stems and never got the slightest bit sick.

Hopefully the information here will help you understand any dangers that there might be in using living plants.

Poinsettia is almost synonymous with this season but as I mentioned above has gotten a bad rap in the toxicity department. Apparently it is not unusual for pets to ingest this plant. Though its latex-like sap may cause local irritation to the mouth, even vomiting, toxicology studies do not confirm the public’s perception of the poinsettia being exceedingly harmful.

Mistletoe is where you might consider using an artificial variety because the real thing, particularly English mistletoe, is known to be extremely toxic. It contains toxalbumin and pharatoxin viscumin (Lectins, Phoratoxins). Consuming the berries or leaves can cause severe gastrointestinal (drooling, vomiting, diarrhea and abdominal pain), cardiovascular (low blood pressure, low heart rate), and neurologic (collapse, unusual behavior, ataxia, seizures) signs even death. If you think a pet has consumed this, you should contact a vet and the animal poison control center immediately.

Holly berries and leaves if consumed may cause gastrointestinal signs (decreased appetite, vomiting, or diarrhea) and lethargy or depression. The prickly leaves contain saponins, methylxanthines, and cyanogens causing the toxicity. Foreign body obstruction can also occur with the ingestion of large amounts of leaves.

Amaryllis (Belladonna, St. Joseph Lily, Jersey Lily, Cape Belladonna, Naked Lady) is a favorite of mine since I can plant it in a pot and watch it grow into a magnificent floral display. Unfortunately that beauty is accompanied by potential toxicity due to Lycorine, a highly poisonous alkaloid, and other noxious substances which can cause increased salivation, gastrointestinal distress (vomiting, diarrhea, decreased appetite, and abdominal pain), lethargy

and tremors, and possible death if ingested by pets. Though the entire plant can produce symptoms, the bulb is supposedly the most toxic portion.

Christmas Cactus (*Schlumbergera*) also can be a magnificent floral accent this time of year. If consumed the fibrous plant material may cause mechanical irritation to the stomach and intestine, possibly leading to vomiting or diarrhea. Some sources say that there isn't any true toxicity for cats or dogs; others mention possible anorexia and depression plus ataxia in cats.

Christmas Trees are not normally thought of as being toxic or poisonous to pets. Veterinarians do report that Australian, Norfolk and Norfolk Island pines may have potential toxicity, but the toxic mechanism is unknown. Ingestion of pine needles may cause gastrointestinal signs and lethargy. The biggest concern is the possible toxicity of the standing water under the tree because it can harbor bacteria, molds, or other agents that cause a pet to become extremely sick. Another concern is the preservatives used which contain small amounts of fertilizer and dextrose. Ingestion of these preservatives can cause mild vomiting and diarrhea.

Pinecones are quite often used for decoration. It's important to remember that they can be hazardous to pets. When chewed the fibers of the pine cone can break off and be a choking hazard. If larger pieces of the cone are swallowed, instead of being digested, they can cause an intestinal blockage. Additionally, pine sap and needles carry substances that may cause allergic reactions in pets.

Should your pet ingest any of these plants, it is suggested that you contact the ASPCA Animal Poison Control (<https://www.aspca.org/pet-care/poison-control>) or call (888)426-4435 to determine the best course of action to take to help you pet.