

# Avoiding poisonous plants in summer, fall

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Summer and fall are popular times for outdoor activities such as hiking, gardening and playing outside. Unfortunately, poisonous plants can get in the way of enjoying your time outdoors.

Poisonous plants have a range of harmful effects. Poison ivy, *Toxicodendron radicans*, is the most recognized poisonous plant in Alabama. It can cause a skin rash and sometimes an allergic reaction requiring medical treatment.

Certain plants, such as caladiums, contain sharp oxalate crystals that irritate the skin if touched and the mouth if eaten. Many familiar plants contain toxins that cause vomiting and diarrhea or lead to death.

## **Did you know azaleas are toxic if ingested?**

Protecting yourself and others from poisonous plants requires learning to identify familiar plants, taking steps to avoid exposure and knowing what to do if you are exposed.

The University of Alabama's Monica Watkins suggests ways to avoid poisonous plants.

- Purchase or borrow a simple plant field guide. A good one will include a section describing different types of leaves, flowers and fruits using botanical terminology. Stick to learning the more basic terms at first, and look up more challenging terms in the glossary later. Plant descriptions will use these terms along with

photos or drawings to distinguish between different plants. Descriptions should include both common and Latin names.

- Start learning to identify familiar plants in your yard. Identify native plants with the [field guide](#) and ornamental plants from gardening books. If you aren't certain of your identification, seek assistance from an expert by contacting your county extension office. Once you know what your plants are, label them and make a list for reference in case of poisoning.
- Find out if the plants in your yard are toxic to children or pets, then move on to plants you might encounter on hikes or in local gardens. The book "Poisonous Plants and Venomous Animals of Alabama and Adjoining States," by Whit Gibbons, Robert R. Haynes and Joab L. Thomas, can help you get started.
- Protect yourself when outdoors, especially if you will be disturbing plants. Wear long sleeves, long pants and gloves. If you think you've come in contact with a poisonous plant, wash your skin as soon as possible. If you are particularly sensitive, use a poison ivy wash that neutralizes urushiol, the irritating chemical found in poison ivy, poison oak and poison sumac.
- Teach older children how to identify [plants](#) that should be avoided, such as poison ivy. "Leaves of three, let them be" is an easy way to remember to avoid poison ivy.
- Supervise pets and younger children around [poisonous plants](#). Teach children not to eat anything unless an adult has told them it is safe. If you suspect that a poisonous plant has been ingested, call the Poison Control Center at 1-800-222-1222.

Provided by University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa

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