

Look But Don't Touch

Plants that can make you sneeze, scratch, and suffer

By Theresa Badurek

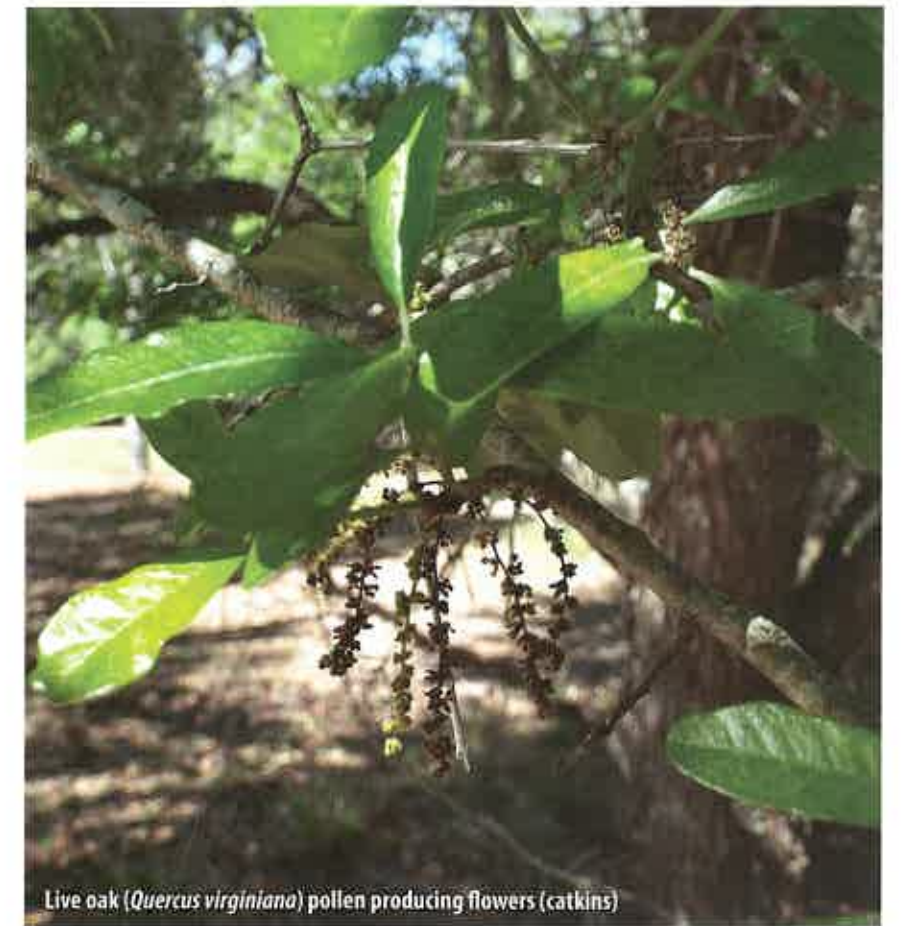
Plants provide us with so much joy and so many health benefits ... but what about those that sometimes do the opposite? Even poisonous and allergenic plants can be beautiful, provide food for wildlife, and sometimes even have useful medicinal compounds (but leave that to the professionals). One simply needs to know the qualities (good and bad) of the particular plants they cultivate. Let's look at some common plants found in Florida gardens or landscapes and learn a little more. This is not an exhaustive list of poisonous plants in Florida so be sure to learn all you can about your green garden friends – especially if you have pets or young children.



Azalea (*Rhododendron* spp.)

PLANTS THAT CAN MAKE YOU SNEEZE

If you have allergies, you probably already know that plant pollens can make you sneeze and wheeze. But do you know why some cause more trouble than others? First it helps to understand a little about pollination. Plants that rely on insects for pollination are typically brightly colored, heavily perfumed, or have some other method of attracting insects. They also generally produce smaller amounts of pollen since they rely on the insects to carry it directly from plant to plant. Wind-pollinated plants are another story altogether. They produce large amounts of pollen in the hopes that at least some of it may land on the desired plant when the wind blows. The pollen grains must also be smaller and lighter to be carried by the wind this way, which also makes them more likely to find their way into our sinuses and lungs. In general, the trees and grasses with inconspicuous (not showy) flowers tend to use the wind to disperse their progeny; therefore these plants are often the main culprits during allergy season.



Live oak (*Quercus virginiana*) pollen producing flowers (catkins)



Slash pine (*Pinus slashii*) cones, male pollen producing cone on the left, female cone on the right

PLANTS THAT CAN MAKE YOU SCRATCH

Luckily there are not very many common garden plants that will make you scratch and break out in a rash, but there are a few and you should learn the ones you are most likely to encounter. Above all, you should wear gloves when gardening and doing yard maintenance to protect your hands from myriad abuses. The most well known among the itch-causing plants is good ol' poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*). The itch-causing compound urushiol is what causes the burning, swelling, and rash one gets from poison ivy. Although you might find poison ivy irritating, its berries are a wonderful food source for birds, raccoons, and other wildlife. Urushiol is also present in Brazilian pepper (*Schinus terebinthifolius*), Florida's most-hated invasive plant. Not everyone will react to this one, but it's still best to wear gloves and long sleeves when removing this garden alien. The milky sap, or latex, from milkweed (*Asclepias* spp.), croton (*Codiaeum variegatum*), poinsettia (*Euphorbia*

pulcherrima), and pencil tree (*Euphorbia tirucalli*) can also cause skin irritation, so cover up when working with these plants too. There are protective lotions one can apply before working among these plants, as well as soaps designed to help wash the irritant away. If you are especially sensitive you should ask your doctor about the best options.

Somewhat less common, but equally vexing, plants include the stinging plants: heartleaf nettle (*Urtica chamaedryoides*, a true stinging nettle) and the tread-softly plant (*Cnidoscolus stimulosus*). I knew the latter as the "devil plant" growing up because if you touch it, it hurts like the devil! Both plants use tiny glass-like stinging hairs to defend themselves. A gardener need only brush lightly against one of these to suffer an hour or more with a burning sensation. The reaction is similar in both: a stinging sensation sometimes accompanied by a rash. One may bring (some) relief to the affected skin by washing the area and applying a paste of baking soda and water.



Poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*)



Tread-softly (*Cnidoscolus stimulosus*)

PLANTS THAT CAN MAKE YOU SUFFER

Here is where things can get quite serious. There are a number of common Florida plants – both native and introduced – that are poisonous or toxic if ingested. Reactions can range from stomachache to death and a variety of horrible symptoms in between. Most of us know well enough not to graze on plants we don't know to be edible, but what about our children and pets? If you've got others like this to look out for it's a good idea to know the most common poisonous plants in the garden. Let's start with oleander (*Nerium oleander*). My grandmother used to tell me stories about picnics along the Courtney Campbell Causeway (originally called Davis Causeway) in Tampa Bay when she was a teenager in the 1930s. Folks would cook hotdogs on sticks using nearby oleander branches. Those people would get very sick ... even just from inhaling the smoke of the burning branches. Apparently oleander stories like this have become something of an urban legend over the years. Oleander is still a very popular landscape plant and all parts are highly toxic.

Azaleas (*Rhododendron* spp.), lilies (several genera in the lily family), angel's

trumpet (*Brugmansia* spp.), devil's trumpet (*Datura* spp.), hollies (*Ilex* spp.), Carolina jessamine (*Gelsemium sempervirens*), caladiums (*Caladium x hortulanum*), and philodendron (*Philodendron* spp.), are all plants with poisonous parts that are commonly cultivated in our gardens. Lantana is another popular poisonous plant, especially in butterfly gardens. In addition to the fact that *Lantana camara* is an invasive exotic plant, all plant parts are poisonous. Many cases of poisoned children have resulted from kids eating the green, unripe fruit of lantana. Other common poisonous "weed" plants include rosary pea (*Abrus precatorius*), castor bean (*Ricinus communis*), and deadly nightshade (*Solanum nigrum*).

The most important thing to remember is to be knowledgeable about what is grown, not fearful. A poisonous plant should not be considered a "bad" plant, only one to plant and care for with caution. Keep them out of the reach of pets and young children, but don't fret – even poisonous plants bring beauty to our gardens and provide for wildlife!🐾

Theresa Badurek is the urban horticulture agent for the University of Florida/IFAS Extension in Pinellas County.

For the gardener who wants to know even more about poisonous plants in Florida, or where to look in an emergency:

Phone number for poison control:
1-800-222-1222

Books:

Miller, J. F. (1975). *Poisonous Plants of the Southern United States*. Athens, Ga.: Cooperative Extension Service, College of Agriculture, University of Georgia.

Nelson, L., Shitt, R. D., Dalick, M. J., & Lampe, K. E. (2007). *Handbook of Poisonous and Injurious Plants*. New York: New York Botanical Garden.

Websites:

Florida Poison Information Center, Plants: poisoncenter.tampa.org/poison-topics/poisonous-plants/

Pet Poison Hotline:

petpoisonhelpline.com/pet-owners/basics/top-10-plants-poisonous-to-pets/

List of Plants Poisonous to Pets, Humane Society: humanesociety.org/assets/pdfs/pets/poisonous_plants.pdf



Angel's trumpet (*Brugmansia* spp.)