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Plants that defend themselves with Poison

Yondela Nqadala (Wolwekraal Conservation and Research Organisation)

Plants are a very important source of food. As “primary producers” they make their own food using light from the sun, water and nutrients from the soil. These “primary products” help the plant to stay alive and are made available to humans and animals as fruit and vegetables packed with carbohydrates, proteins, fats and oils.

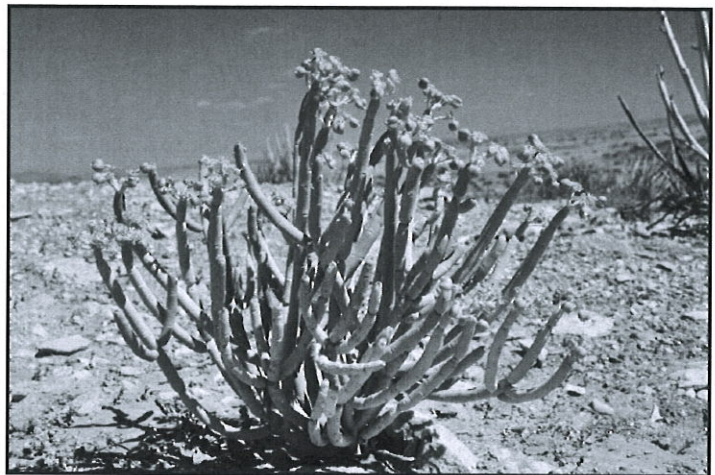
Over hundreds of years, plants have developed a way to protect themselves against being eaten by animals and humans. To guard against herbivores, they produce secondary products that do not assist the plant in important tasks of life. These are poisons, ranging from mild to deadly. Poisonous plants in the veld around Prince Albert include the melkbos (*Euphorbia* species), Kruidjieoer-my-niet (*Melianthus comosus*), Scholtzbos (*Pteronia pallens*), wit bietou (*Dimorphotheca cuneata*), bushman poison bulb (gifbol) (*Boophae distichya*) and many others. Many plants commonly planted in gardens are also poisonous – for example selonsroos (*Nerium oleander*), wynryt (*ruta graveolens*), wildeals and common wormwood (*Artemisia afra* and *A. dracunculus*).

If there are poisonous plants in and around your home it is necessary to be vigilant. Young children and pets learn by trying new things and often end up eating something they are not supposed to. A bite of a colourful flower or fruit from an ornamental plant can cause serious injury and lead to hospitalisation. Poisonous plants must be kept out of the reach of children and pets, and young

children must be taught not to eat plants.

The signs and symptoms of eating poisonous plants include dizziness, nausea, vomiting, headaches, stomach-aches, diarrhoea, and weakness. When symptoms are serious, take the patient to the nearest health centre immediately. It is important for the caregiver to be able to describe and identify the plant for the doctor since if she knows what type of poison has been eaten, she will know which antidote to give. It is also helpful to show everyone in the family any dangerous plants and learn their scientific and common names. This can also be done by putting small labels on each plant. For correct plant names, you are welcome to visit the Renu-Karoo Nursery for assistance.

In some situations, symptoms appear too late or the health services might take a while to respond to your call. Drinking milk might be helpful, but is to be avoided if it is suspected that the patient ate a plant belonging to Euphorbiaceae. Vomiting can be encouraged to reduce the amount of poison that is already inside. Another helpful method is the use of medicinal charcoal (available from the Prins-Kem Pharmacy for R3 per tablet). If the patient's skin was in contact with a poisonous or prickly plant, skin irritation may occur followed by a rash. The affected area should be washed with warm water and soap as soon as possible, avoiding contact with the eyes. This method must be repeated. The product Roticlean® E (a liquid for external application to the skin) must be used in cases where there has been contact with Euphorbiaceae species. ■



*A fine example of Euphorbia (also known as melkbos).
Photo: Luciano Napolitano*

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