

From Margaret Miller
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PLANTS POISONOUS TO PEOPLE

In Florida and Other Warm Areas

by

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Plants Poisonous to People: Wall Charts

Exotic Plants

with

48 COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS

by

the author

HURRICANE HOUSE

Miami, Florida

1971

POINSETTIA

Euphorbia pulcherrima Willd.

SHRUB, to 15 ft., with arching or drooping, wand-like branches, containing an abundance of milky sap. LEAVES, more or less indented or wavy, to 8 in. long, those clustered in a rosette around the flowers are bright red, or less often pink or creamy-white. FLOWERS, green-and-yellow in small clumps. FRUIT, 3 lobed, ½ in. long, with 3 oblong seeds. This Mexican plant, widely beloved as a symbol of Christmas, is common in Florida dooryards and is usually trimmed back to a height of 1 or 1½ ft. in summer.

TOXICITY: The sap is caustic like that of other members of the genus. It has served as a crude depilatory after dilution with oil to reduce its irritant action. People who carry the trimmings to their trash piles in their bare arms sometimes acquire dermatitis similar to that from poison ivy. The fact that this is done during warm weather and while perspiring from the exertion of pruning probably increases susceptibility. However, in March, 1955, the writer saw blisters on all fingers of a young woman who had merely transplanted a small poinsettia that had been given her in a pot at Christmas time. F. C. Hoehne, Brazilian plant authority, warned that the sap is dangerous to the eyes.

Internally, the sap is highly irritating and very toxic in quantity. Small children in Florida have complained of burning in the mouth and throat from sucking a stem, a leaf or flower-bud. They usually quickly desist because of the acrid and bitter taste. In Jan., 1965, a 2½-yr.-old child in Rochester, N.Y., was exceedingly ill from eating a poinsettia leaf. Dr. H. L. Arnold related in *Poisonous Plants of Hawaii* that a 2-yr.-old child ate a poinsettia leaf, experienced vomiting, diarrhea and delirium and died, in 1919. In Mexican folk medicine, a decoction of the floral leaves (8 gm. in 500 gm. water) has been long prescribed as a galactagogue with the warning that large doses are dangerous. In Florida, there have been hazardous frivolous uses of the poinsettia including the freezing of an entire showy inflorescence in a block of ice and floating it in a party punch bowl. On melting, the irritant properties could well contaminate the punch and cause illness. The seeds are emetic and cathartic. Cattle are poisoned by grazing on the plant but a large bush was consumed by a goat in Costa Rica without apparent harm.



MANCHINEEL

Hippomane mancinella

Family: Euphorbiaceae

**TREE (WILD). MILKY SAP CAUSES
RASH AND BLISTERS. FRUIT AND
OTHER PARTS TOXIC INTERNALLY.**

MANCHINEEL

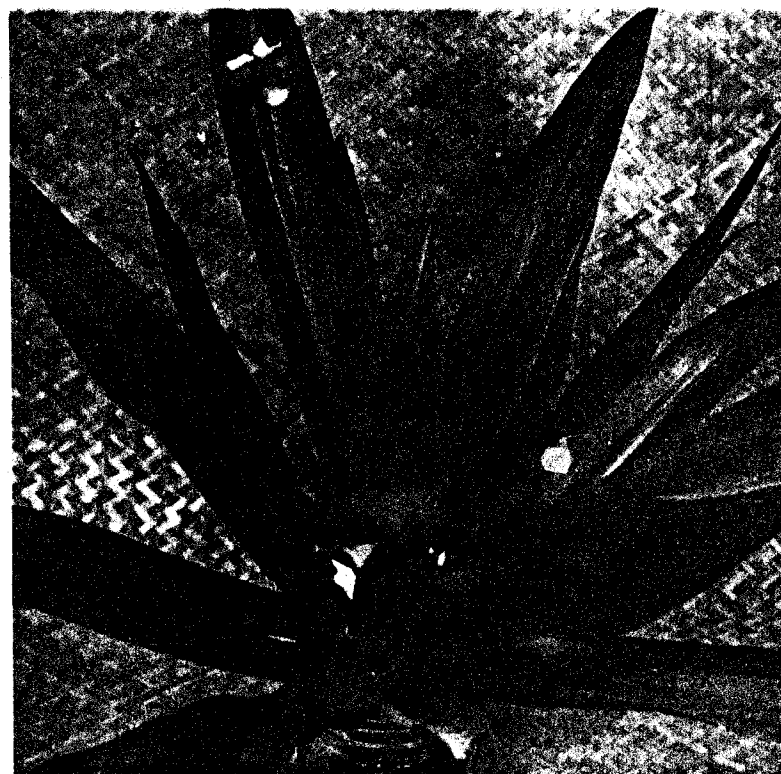
Hippomane mancinella L.

TREE, to 50 ft., with broad crown, light-gray bark and abundant milky sap. LEAVES, thin, smooth, 2 to 4 in. long. FLOWERS, tiny, yellow or rose in 6 in. spikes. FRUIT, round or oblate, 1½ to 2 in. wide, light-green to yellow, smooth-skinned, with thin layer of whitish flesh and large woody core enclosing a rough stone containing 6 to 8, ¼-in. long, brown seeds. A native tree of South Florida and the Keys, once abundant, now rare except in the Cape Sable region of Everglades National Park.

TOXICITY: Direct contact with the caustic milky sap can result, within ½ hr., in a burning sensation followed by severe blistering and painful swelling. A Curacao fisherman who had slung a rope around a manchineel branch and put sufficient weight on it to erode the bark, later wrapped the rope around his waist and suffered very severe consequences. Dew or rain dripping from the leaves carries with it sufficient irritating material to cause dermatitis.

Nevertheless, the tree is much appreciated for its shade in the West Indies and on coasts of Central America and northern South America. Bathers recline in chairs beneath it and nearly nude children climb the trunk and clamber over the larger branches without ill effect if the bark is unbroken. This can be a hazardous pastime, however, for even a trace of the sap conveyed to the eyes will produce intense irritation and possibly temporary blindness. Smoke from burning manchineel causes eye inflammation and headache.

The sap was reportedly used by the Carib Indians as arrow poison and the leaves were put in the water of springs to poison enemies who drank from them. According to Dr. W. M. Lauter of the University of Florida, all parts of the tree contain *physostigmine* or some other similar alkaloid, plus a *sapogenin*. The writings of the early Spaniards and of latter-day sensationalists greatly exaggerate the dangerous aspects of this tree. Eating the thin flesh of the fruits may produce gradual ulceration of the intestinal tract. The immediate effects are irritation and inflammation, sometimes blistering, around the mouth and ordinarily very little is ingested.



OYSTER PLANT

Rhoeo spathacea

Family: Commelinaceae

**HERB. SUCCULENT LEAVES EASILY
BROKEN; JUICE A COMMON CAUSE
OF ITCHING AND FINE RASH.**