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Colorful Berries are Not Always Safe

My child has eaten some berries from a plant in my yard! Will he be all right? This is not an unusual question. In fact, this one was received at our office this morning. Don't let an incident with a poisonous plant such as this endanger a family member.

Many native and exotic landscape plants produce berries which they hold through the winter. Some are attractive to children who are tempted to eat them.

Each time that such a situation arises there are some quick steps that must be taken. First, the plant from which the berries came must be positively identified. If the plant is unfamiliar, contact someone who can identify it as soon as possible. Those who could be helpful include your local nursery or garden center, Extension Agent, or a knowledgeable gardener.

There is a poison information center for Florida that can be reached by calling 1-800-282-3171. The center maintains a data base of poisonous plants and provides recommendations once the berries have been identified.

If poisoning is suspected, consult a physician or the poison control center of your hospital immediately. When the plant is known, take as good an example of it as you can to the treatment center. It must be identified exactly, so that the nature of its toxic substances and the effective treatments can be determined with precision. For smaller, herbaceous plants, take the entire plant, including roots. If the plants are large, as for trees and shrubs, take a large branch with several leaves, flowers and fruits. Also take note as to whether it appears to be cultivated or wild. It is far better to have too large a specimen than one that is too small for determination.

The relative toxicity of plants or plant parts in our environment runs the full gamut. There are those species that are safe, some that will make you sick and some that are lethal. Following are some poisonous berries that might be found in almost any urban or

suburban landscape.

✍ Mistletoe berries contain toxic proteins that have caused deaths of humans and livestock. Severe symptoms begin occurring one to two hours after ingestion.

✍ Holly berries contain an unknown toxin, with some species said to promote vomiting and diarrhea.

✍ Some varieties of Lantana, a popular landscape plant locally, bear green berries that are very toxic. Poisonings in humans, including a death in Tampa, have resulted from children eating the green berries.

✍ Ligustrum, also commonly known as privet, bears black berries that have caused the death of several people in Europe.

✍ All parts of the Chinaberry tree are poisonous, and the ripe fruit is more toxic than the unripe fruit. Deaths due to eating the berries have resulted in both humans and livestock.

✍ Both cherry laurel and wild black cherry are found in many landscapes. Both can cause cyanide poisoning if eaten.

✍ All parts of English and Algerian Ivy, especially the berries, are extremely poisonous, if ingested.

Though there are many poisonous plants in our environment, the removal of every one with toxic properties is not recommended. It would probably not be possible anyway because you would also be removing such favorites as azalea, allamanda, crape myrtle, lobelia, iris and hydrangea. These and many more common plants have parts that are toxic to some degree.

Rather than attempting to remove all danger, teach children not to place any part of an unfamiliar plant in their mouths. Actually, there are likely more dangerous, and accessible compounds under your sink and in the storage building than in the yard.

Question of the Week: Nutgrass began to appear in my lawn last summer. Is there a weed killer that will help to control it, and if so, can I apply it now?

Answer: You are about 3 months too late. There are two relatively new products that can be helpful in controlling this nutsedge in warm season turfgrasses. Image is recommended for use on purple nutsedge and Manage is recommended for yellow and the other sedges. However, they are effective only when applied during the warm season when these weeds

are actively growing.