

DON'T EAT THAT! What about the Toxic things in the garden?

Having finished our late winter garden chores, like pruning roses and cutting back fig trees, it's time to think about Spring topics. In Europe, after a long cold winter, the chefs are ready to use the first fresh greens from the garden. That often includes potherbs gathered from the fields and the first growth of spring in the herb garden (usually dill and parsley). Palates are ready for something fresh and green too, so even unfamiliar greens are welcome on the menu.

Here of course, we've been enjoying fresh greens all winter long, possibly topped with an herb gremolata (a mashup of parsley or other greens, garlic, and sometimes ground nuts). Everybody is ready for something fresh. But in case you want to head out to forage something new and unknown, let's stop for a minute and consider that not everything that grows in the field is good to eat. Say what? It's likely natural and maybe even organic, so how could be toxic?

The Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of California, has been reviewing online resources that address what's not good to eat. At https://ucanr.edu/sites/poisonous_safe_plants/, you will find a list of plants that could make you itch, make you sick, or even kill you. One list is alphabetical by common name, and another alphabetical by Latin name. To avoid the possibility of kidney failure, coma or death, it's good to review both the "SAFE" list and also the "TOXIC" list.

We can put ourselves at risk if we think we're about to eat a safe plant but instead have a toxic look-alike. Or maybe we know one part of a plant is safe, such as rhubarb stems, but we've forgotten another part is not - the rhubarb leaves. Another example is opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*). Your morning poppy seed muffin has seeds from that poppy, but the stems and leaves are quite toxic. You can eat an apple, but don't eat the seeds.

In addition, consider the rules that accompany the lists. For instance, you should not eat anything you gather from the roadside. Why? Well, consider the possibility of a little motor oil or antifreeze that might have spilled on the road and washed to the side in our last rain. The choice of plant may not be wrong but its location is likely to be contaminated.

Know the toxicity of things in your garden. Did you know that even a little milkweed, ingested, can be lethal? You don't want to accidentally eat something dangerous. Just imagine having to tell the doctor in the ER "Gee, I don't know what I ate that has made me so sick. Haven't a clue".

And finally, if you can't validate that the item you want to eat is safe, DON'T EAT IT!

I answered a recent Hotline query as to whether the berries of the Indian Hawthorn, *Raphiolepis indica*, are edible. I checked both toxic and safe lists, and found the berries are fine to eat. I'm not sure the questioner ran out to make a berry pie at that very moment, but at least he knows it's safe to do so.

Bon Appetit!