



The Careful Indoor Gardener

Winter weather took its own sweet time this year, but it's finally here. I fire up the woodstove almost daily, emptied out Raphael's pool and relocated 'his' frogs to their cold weather digs in Someday Pond's cozy mud floor, and successfully procrastinated until it's too late and too cold to finish about a hundred outdoor gardening chores. By this time last year my houseplants would have ended their summer vacation outdoors and been crowded in front of the sunniest windows. The Thanksgiving centerpieces would still be colorful, but I'd already be filling tabletops and mantelpieces with pine-scented greenery. Deck the halls!

But not this year, thanks to seven pounds of feline wrecking ball. I already had two well-behaved cats who were wholly indifferent to anything green, with the obvious exception of catnip, but the addition of this energetic creature, intent on chewing everything she can reach, has forced me to educate myself on plant toxicity. It seems worthwhile to share what I've learned. (Note: I'm well aware that progressing from two to three pushes me dangerously close to being called a crazy cat lady, but I categorically reject the label. I didn't go looking for another cat. I was the victim of expert manipulation by a loving nephew, who knows a soft-hearted sucker when he sees one. The newcomer is named the Bug, in part because she's a cuddlebug, but equally because she bugs the heck out of me.)

Toxic plants fall into three groups: houseplants, cut flowers, and holiday décor. I can only discuss a handful of each, so if you have pets, please take a few minutes to look up anything you plan to bring home. A good resource is this [printable list of pet-toxic plants](#) from the ASPCA.

House plants: I had to ditch the clivia, painstakingly grown from seed, along with the ubiquitous jade plant, philodendron, and very lethal Sago palm. English ivy, banished! My kitchen window showcased bay laurel, delicate cyclamen, and aloe, all of which had to go (while the aloe gel is safe, the rest of the plant is not). Kalanchoe, begonias, even geraniums are all potentially hazardous. Spider plant can stay, if it can survive Bug's rapt attention. Depending on the size of your pets and the amount they ingest, reactions to some plants may range from mild stomach upset to life-threatening symptoms, so it pays to check the details. Some safe alternatives are orchids, bromeliads, and Christmas cactus, all of which will enliven your space.

Cut flowers: Lilies top the list for cats: a few grains of pollen licked from their fur, or a few sips of water from the vase, can quickly send a cat into kidney failure. But I was surprised to learn that chrysanthemums and carnations, both

staples of holiday arrangements, are also capable of harm. My mum-filled arrangements, which in prior years made the house cheerful for at least a week after Thanksgiving, instead were sent home with non-pet-owning guests. Next year I'll stick to roses.

Holiday decorations: Grinch-like, I list herewith the perils:

Poinsettias: The dangers of this one, at least, have been deemed overstated. It has a bad reputation, but usually causes only mild upset.

Yew: In contrast, yew's toxicity is off the charts. Just a berry or two can kill your pet—or your child, or you—in just a few hours. Even so, you can safely eat the red flesh of the berries, if the seeds have all been removed, and there are even recipes for yew berry pastries or jelly. I'll leave that culinary experiment to the wild mushroom foragers and fugu eaters.

Holly and mistletoe: Both have enticing berries, and both can sicken pets, though usually not life-threateningly so unless eaten in large amounts. Hollies can also injure with their spiny leaves. American mistletoe is somewhat safer than the European variety, though that probably doesn't matter much, as it's unlikely many of us will be able to tell the difference.

Azaleas: Those cute little potted azaleas sold everywhere in bright red, white, or pink are festive but lethal. All parts are toxic.

Amaryllis: Another dangerous beauty I've grown and given away for years, oblivious of its potential dangers. The toxins are most concentrated in the bulb, which pets are less likely to eat, but present also in the rest of the plant. Again, my resident cats ignored them, but I can't trust the new one to do the same. Out they go.

Christmas trees: Okay, no, the tree itself isn't going to poison your pets, though a meal of it will upset their systems. Nevertheless, dangers lurk in the form of intestinal blockage from half-chewed stems, choking hazards from pine cones and tinsel, and even illnesses spread from mold and bacteria if pets drink the water in the tree stand. Then, too, animals, people, and furniture could be damaged if the tree topples, so be sure it's carefully secured. My tree will be in a room that can be safely closed off when I'm not there to supervise.

Do you have to give up all your festive holiday décor to keep your pets safe? Not entirely. Know your pets' habits, omit the most dangerous plants (or relocate them to safer spots, if possible), and keep a watchful eye. I wish you all a safe and very happy holiday season.