



## The Poison Garden

by Marilyn Loser

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This spring I had the wonderful opportunity to visit Blarney Castle in Ireland and kiss the famous stone which is supposed to give one the gift of eloquence. With the maiden name of Maguire I just had to!

The castle and its grounds are incredible, but the Poison Garden was an unexpected pleasure. A sign posted at the entrance to the garden states, "The Blarney Castle Poison Garden was created with the purpose of educating visitors about the poisonous plants that can be found both in the wild and also in our own gardens. It aims to show both the positive and negative aspects of these plants by looking at their various uses, including medical, both traditionally and in modern times."

Naturally, I was interested to see what was included that grows in our Alamosa garden. Before you get too concerned, please be aware that the sign also states, "In the USA, less than five people a year die as a result of eating a poisonous plant in its natural state." Still, I was intrigued. Below are plants common to our Alamosa garden and Blarney Castle's Poison Garden.

I've always loved my bit of Monkshood (*Aconitum napellus*) and it turns out to be one of the most poisonous plants in the garden according to the Poison Garden website (<http://www.thepoisongarden.co.uk/>). It has such a distinctive and unpleasant taste that cases of accidental poisoning are extremely rare though not unknown. It grows in the San Juan Mountains to the west of Alamosa, especially near streams. It is sometimes called Wolf's Bane or Dog's Bane. The name may reflect that toxins extracted from the plant were historically used to kill wolves. Each flower on the lovely raceme is purple with a hood effect that looks like a monk's hood.

"Until recently, the only well-established case of murder with aconitine was in 1881 when Dr. Lamson used it to poison his brother-in-law after putting it in the newly invented soluble capsules for taking medicine without having to taste it," states the PG website.

I was surprised to see Dark Columbine (*Aquilegia atrata*) in the garden. It is a very dark purple and is native to SW Europe. In folk medicine it was used as an astringent and as a sedative. It is considered very poisonous because its seeds and roots produce toxic alkaloids reports Wikipedia. Colorado's state flower is the Colorado Blue columbine (*A. caerulea*) and apparently Native Americans ate flowers of some columbines in moderation as a condiment with other fresh greens.

Lily of the Valley (*Convallaria majalis*) is also highly toxic. According to the PG website, there is only one recorded case of poisoning where, in 1989, a family of four ate the bulbs thinking they were part of the onion family. Daffodil (*Narcissus* species) bulbs are also poisonous. One of the most frequent causes of accidental poisoning occurs when people mistake the bulbs for onions. The PG website says that eating as little as half a bulb has been known to cause an unpleasant stomach upset lasting a couple of days but, typically, the symptoms are not so serious as to need hospital treatment.

The bulbs, leaves, and stems of Iris are mildly poisonous states another website. It also states that “In ancient times Egyptians would grind together salt, small doses of dried iris, mint and pepper, to make a substance for cleaning the teeth. Recent research has shown that the iris really does have beneficial properties and a preparation made from iris is effective in combatting gum disease.”

Cornell University’s “Plants Poisonous to Livestock” webpage says Iris rhizomes and rootstocks are poisonous as are all parts of Bleeding Hearts (*Dicentra* species). Other flowers that cause problems if ingested include Lupine, Hydrangea, and Delphinium species.

Some plants, such as Rue (*Ruta graveolens*), can cause problems when handled. Photosensitization (development of abnormally heightened reactivity of the skin or eyes to sunlight) happens when the plant is rubbed onto the skin causing the plant material to break down and release compounds that irritate the skin. In folklore, Rue was used to keep various unpleasant things out of the house. It was hung in doors and windows to prevent evil spirits from entering the house and worn on the belt to keep witches away.

I’ll close with text from the bottom of the sign posted in the castle’s Poison Garden.

*“So, the plants don’t cause many deaths? Actually, they do...but not when they are in their natural state. The huge number of deaths occur once we start to make products from the plants. In Europe, over 7000 people die from an overdose of heroin every year and around the world, over 5 million die from smoking related diseases. The plants aren’t “bad” – we make them harmful by the ways in which we use them.”*