

## Pretty but toxic: Watch toddlers around these houseplants

January 24 2023, by Jessica Damiano

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This Jan. 17, 2023, image provided by Jessica Damiano shows a vining pothos houseplant, which has toxic properties so should be kept away from children. Credit: Jessica Damiano via AP

When visiting friends or family who have both houseplants and young

children, I've been compared to "Aunt Bonnie" from the Geico commercial "Aunt Infestation."

In it, a young couple who just moved into a new home complains of having pests—not ants but overbearing "aunts." Like the one who declares the condiments in their refrigerator to be "Expired! Expired! Expired!," I invariably invade room after room of my hosts' homes exclaiming, "Toxic! Toxic! Toxic!"

I'm pointing out houseplants that should be kept out of kids' mouths. And I don't mind dashing friends' hopes of an Instagram-worthy indoor jungle if it means potentially preventing harm.

"We get an average of 33,000 calls a year from people whose kids put different plants in their mouths," said Kaitlyn Brown, clinical managing director of America's Poison Centers in Arlington, Virginia. "It's primarily toddlers crawling around who get in trouble with household plants because they explore their environment and they put everything in their mouths."

Most accidental exposures aren't serious, she said, "but in some cases the irritant effect becomes severe enough to affect breathing, and also some plants can cause burns to the skin or eyes."

Recently, I spotted a beautiful, mature *Dieffenbachia* in the kitchen of a cousin's home. She said her son, who had just begun crawling, had shown interest in its foliage.

So it fell to me to tell her the plant earned its common name, dumb cane, from the archaic term for mute. Chewing a portion of its stem can render someone temporarily but painfully speechless, as the calcium oxalate crystals in it can cause throat and mouth swelling. Exposure to its sap can lead to nose, eye and [skin irritation](#).

Caladium, flamingo flower (Anthurium), Swiss cheese plant (Monstera), peace lily (Spathiphyllum), ZZ plant (Zamioculcas zamiifolia), philodendron and pothos (Epipremnum) also contain oxalate crystals. The latter two are vining plants, which require more vigilance because they can grow downward from what was considered a safe, out-of-reach spot.

Amaryllis and its relatives, including clivia and daffodil, contain lycorine, a toxic alkaloid that can cause varying degrees of abdominal pain, diarrhea, nausea and vomiting.

If you suspect your child has nibbled a stem, leaf, flower, root or bulb, call the national poison control center (1-800-222-1222) for guidance. "It's always best to call so we can advise about what symptoms to watch for or help decide if they need to go to the hospital," Brown said.

Teach children not to put non-food plant parts into their mouths. Educate yourself, too, by researching whether your plants are safe to grow around kids. Learn their botanical names so you can provide them to a poison specialist or medical personnel in the event of an incident. Keep the plant tag handy or write each plant's name under its pot for quick reference.

Not all houseplants are problematic, of course. Spider plants (Chlorophytum comosum) are not only nontoxic, but are among the most prolific and easiest indoor plants to grow.

African violets (Saintpaulia), Boston ferns (Nephrolepis exaltata), Christmas cactus (Schlumbergera), waxplants (Hoya), parlor palms (Chamaedorea elegans), radiator plants (Peperomia), prayer plants (Maranta leuconeura) and baby's tears (Soleirolia soleirolii) are other safe options. So are culinary herbs.

Yet even though nontoxic plants probably won't make you seriously ill, they aren't meant to be eaten and could cause stomach irritation and other unpleasant symptoms.

Start your research on potential risks at [PoisonHelp.org](https://poisonhelp.org) or on the website of your local poison control center. And err on the side of caution; you'll make Aunt Bonnie proud.

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