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Table of contents



<u>From the Editorial Team</u>	3
<u>Department News & Reports</u>	4
<u>Club News & Report</u>	27
<u>Self-Love First</u>	39
<u>Travelling</u>	46
<u>Home Garden</u>	58
<u>Teaching & Learning</u>	64
<u>Lecturer's Contribution</u>	68
<u>Creative Writing</u>	81
<u>The Team</u>	90

Beautiful but Dangerous: Common Plants That Pose Risks to Young Children

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The Thriving Floriculture Industry in Malaysia

Floriculture, the cultivation and trade of flowers and decorative plants, is a thriving industry in Malaysia. In 2024, the Malaysia Floriculture Market is estimated to be worth USD 1.12 billion, with projections reaching USD 2.31 billion by 2029, reflecting a robust compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 15.66%. Malaysia is also a significant global exporter of cut flowers, with fresh-cut flower exports generating over USD 80 million annually (Malaysia Floriculture Market Size & Share Analysis - Growth Trends & Forecasts (2024 - 2029), 2024)



The Appeal of Ornamental Plants

Closer to home, the demand for local plants is equally impressive. During festive seasons or when moving into new homes, homeowners often purchase ornamental plants to bring life and vibrancy to their living spaces. However, amidst this growing trend, an important question arises: are all these plants safe for the most vulnerable members of our households especially young children?



Insights from Poisonous Plants of Malaysia

One book that comes to mind, which I once spotted tucked away on my father's shelves, is A. Salam Abdullah's 1990 work, Poisonous Plants of Malaysia which stands as one of the earliest studies of poisonous plants in Malaysia. This book provides a look at various plants, many of which are common in Malaysian homes and gardens, that pose potential dangers to humans and animals alike.



Pong Pong (Cerbera odollam)
(Photo Credit Singapore National Parks)



Castor Bean Plant
(iStock Photo by fotolinchen)



Oleander
(Credit Unsplash Photo)

The book is meticulously organised, featuring detailed descriptions of each plant, including their scientific names, physical characteristics and toxic properties. For instance, the book highlights well-known poisonous plants such as Dumb Cane (Dieffenbachia) (known as keladi in Malay), which can cause severe irritation if ingested and Oleander (or bunga anis in Malay), a beautiful yet highly toxic plant found in many gardens. Other examples include the Castor Bean Plant (known as pokok jarak in Malay), infamous for its ricin-containing seeds and Cerbera Odollam (pokok pong-pong locally), notorious for its deadly seeds.

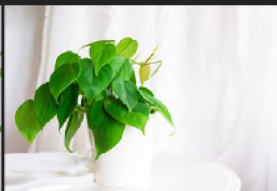
Additionally, the book discusses the symptoms of poisoning for both humans and animals, providing valuable first-aid advice and recommendations for prevention. Parents and pet owners, for example, will find the information on common indoor plants such as Aloe Vera and Philodendron particularly useful, as these are often overlooked for their toxicity.



Dumb Cane
(iStock Photo Credit Edwin Tan)



Aloe Vera
(Freepik Photo)



Philodendron
(iStock Photo by scisetialfio)

A. Salam Abdullah also sheds light on the cultural and historical uses of these plants, some of which have medicinal properties when handled correctly, making the book an intriguing blend of botany and cultural heritage. The final sections provide actionable advice for handling poisonous plants safely, making it a practical resource for households, gardeners and researchers alike.

Are There Truly Safe Plants for Homes with Children?

Determining whether there is such a thing as a "safe" plant can be challenging. While many plants, such as the tulasi and other local herbs, are valued for their medicinal properties, their presence at the area reachable to young children can inadvertently pose risks to them. Even if the plants do not pose potential toxicity, accidents can occur for instance, potted plants might topple over, injuring children, or broken pots could cause cuts. Young ones may also play with soil, which can lead to hygiene concerns.

To ensure safety, it's wise to delay introducing plants into spaces accessible to young children. Instead, consider placing plants in areas out of their reach until they learn appropriate boundaries. When outdoors, supervision is key to fostering safe interactions with nature while preventing accidents. With careful planning and guidance, children can gradually learn to coexist safely with the greenery around them.



Supervise plant activities with young children for safety

Reference:

A. Salam Abdullah (1990). Poisonous plants of Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur: Tropical Press.

Malaysia floriculture & share analysis - Growth trends & forecasts (2024 - 2029) (n.d.) Mordor Intelligence. <https://shorturl.at/nMLDJ>