

For the birds

Which is more toxic: *Nandina* or the Internet?

Recent reports in the media have spread news about a poisoning of cedar waxwings, a medium-sized bird. *The Oregonian* ran an article in January with the headline, “Nandina, or heavenly bamboo, common in landscaping, is a toxic hazard to birds.”

To make a long story short, a flock of birds ingested the berries of *Nandina domestica* (heavenly bamboo) and died. Since *Nandina* is so often used in gardens, I was quite surprised to learn that it is a very toxic plant to birds.

Upon further investigation, I discovered that the *Oregonian* article stemmed from an earlier report, which had only recently gone viral on the Internet. The deaths of dozens of cedar waxwings actually occurred in the state of Georgia three years ago. They were first reported in 2010 in a study by the University of Georgia.

Cedar waxwings have a large geographic range. They breed in the southern half of Canada and northern half of the United States. During the winter, when food supplies are low, cedar waxwings migrate in large numbers to the southern United States. They are frequent visitors to Oregon in the winter.

Cedar waxwings are voracious feeders. They often eat until they can eat no more. In the case of the birds in Georgia, both intact and partly digested berries of *N. domestica* were found in large quantities in their gastrointestinal tracts. *Nandina* berries contain small amounts of cyanide, and it was determined that the birds died from cyanide toxicity due to the large quantities of berries they ingested.

Harmful if swallowed?

Is cyanide in a plant unusual? Not at all. Nor is it unusual for a plant to be toxic to different animals at different levels of concentration. In fact, many common garden plants can be toxic if ingested in large quantities.

The pips, or seeds, of apples contain amygdalin, a compound of cyanide



and sugar that degrades to hydrogen cyanide. Cherry, peach and apricot pits also contain amygdalin.

One of the most widely used landscape plants in California is the oleander (*Nerium oleander*), and all species of oleanders contain toxic glycosides, which slow the heartbeat and can even stop it.

The list goes on. The fruits and foliage of English yew (*Taxus baccata*)

are poisonous if ingested. *Brugmansia* (angel's trumpet) is a very popular perennial in Pacific Northwest gardens. All parts of this plant are poisonous if ingested.

Nikkie West is the backyard habitat program coordinator for the Audubon Society of Portland. I spoke with her about the cedar waxwing report from the University of Georgia, and she was well aware of it.

“We have not taken in any birds at the Wildlife Care Center that have displayed the symptoms associated with the *Nandina* berry, nor have our wildlife veterinarians heard about the issue within rehabilitation circles and professional affiliations in the Pacific Northwest,” West said. “Of the approximately 3,000 birds we take in at the Audubon Wildlife Care Center each year, domestic house ▶



During winter and spring, when food supplies are low or out of season, cedar waxwings have been known to feast on the berries of *Nandina domestica*, which are poisonous to them. PHOTO BY JOHN RAKESTRAW

cats are by far the largest cause of injuries — about 40 percent. Due to the types of injuries sustained, these birds have a low survival rate.”

West asked me to emphasize that incorporating native plants into the garden can be a huge benefit to our native bird population.

Besides the incident involving cedar waxwings, I wondered if any other animals had recently been killed by toxic plants.

I spoke with Craig Quirk, DVM, Rose City Veterinary Hospital, about cases he has seen with dogs and cats. He reported that lilies are toxic to cats, and there is usually an increase in cases at Easter, because Easter lilies are brought indoors for decoration. Grapes and raisins can be toxic to some dogs, and xylitol, which is in most sugar-free chewing gums, is also toxic to dogs.

Quirk said that the most common cause of poisonings in dogs is from chocolate. In some cases, it can result in death.

As these examples illustrate, we live in a world where we are in constant contact with many poisonous substances. The berries of *N. domestica* are but one edible enticement to animals.

A common sense antidote

Let me make it perfectly clear that I am an outdoor bird lover. My garden includes many flowers and shrubs that attract birds, and I always provide several sources of water, as well as at least one feeder during all seasons.

My garden also has *N. domestica*, and as I walk through my garden in mid-February, the *Nandina* plants are loaded with bright red berries. For me, their abundance indicates that they are

not a sought-after source of food, or else there would be no red berries left.

Was the media coverage of the Georgia incident really worthy of the attention it received here in Oregon?

One report stated *N. domestica* could be considered an invasive plant. Jennifer Nelson, outreach specialist at the Tualatin Soil and Water Conservation District, wrote in *The Beaverton Leader*: “*Nandina* is a non-domestic noxious and highly invasive weed. *Nandina* has been imported from China and Japan and has invaded many natural areas.”


Even the Association of Northwest Landscape Designers (ANLD) issued a statement urging home gardeners to remove *Nandina*. It should be noted that *Nandina* has only been listed as being invasive in the following states: North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Florida and Texas.

I have lived and gardened in Oregon for more than 40 years, and I have never seen any indication that *N. domestica* is invasive or even an aggressive plant. It is simply a nice evergreen shrub with lacy green foliage that often emerges red and then turns to light green.

The foliage often has bronze tints in the fall, and in late spring, there are clusters of creamy white flowers on the stems. The red berries in winter provide color in what is otherwise a bleak time of year. It is a very low maintenance plant and, once established, requires little water during summer.

The sad story of the cedar waxwings was disseminated through the Internet, and I think this is a good example of not taking everything we read online at face value. There are often many issues surrounding an incident, and we need to look at what we read with a questioning mind and relate it to where we live. Oregon is not Georgia. ☺

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