



You Say Potato, I Say "Be Careful"

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"This is called deadly nightshade," my father announced, pointing to a trailing vine with small purple flowers. My sisters and I were thrilled to have a death-dealing plant in our humble yard. Later, it proved to be the less lethal bittersweet nightshade, but no matter. He might just as well have caught our attention in the vegetable patch.

The only parts of the potato plant that are not life-threatening are the tubers we eat boiled, baked, mashed and fried. And even those are dangerous if consumed raw, green-tinged or spoiled. A prudent cook removes any sprouts that form and may even gouge out the eyes from which they grow.

If this unnerves you, consider that with potatoes, poison runs in the family. Known scientifically as the Solanaceae, plants in the potato family are famous for their numerous powerful alkaloids. Some of them are used for deadly weapons, some for life-saving drugs, and most of them are useful as both, depending on the user's skill or intent.

The hallucinogenic *Datura* genus, which includes the common jimson weed, has caused innumerable deaths. Stinking nightshade (henbane), mandrake (*Mandragora* genus) and the true deadly nightshade, *Atropa belladonna*, have similar profiles. The petunia is a relative, too, and definitely not one you should try as an edible flower garnish. The same goes for the fragrant, white, flowering tobacco (*Nicotiana*). Its genus boasts a strong toxic alkaloid, nicotine, which we alternately spray on garden plants to kill insects and inhale into our lungs.

As a group, the Solanaceae confound any simple view of plant species as either good or bad. Tomatoes, eggplants and peppers, also in the family, were regarded with great suspicion when they first traveled beyond their origins in tropical America, but are now favorites.

It is common knowledge today that Solanaceae fruits are edible but their other parts are not, although you occasionally hear of someone eating pepper foliage, cooked. Why would you do that when you can rough up your intestines with the delicious, spicy, addictive fruit?

It is best to avoid any solanaceous plant part that doesn't have a confirmed track record. In fact, some people seem to have a sensitivity even to the safe ones. Strange rashes have been traced to tomatoes.

You've got to admire a plant group with such a history of drama and paradox. The tomato plant arms itself with prickly, toxic leaves to deter being eaten by an animal, yet offers up a beckoning fruit so that the same animal will eat, and thereby disperse, its seeds. The brown potato under the soil, secretive with its precious calories, is one hue away from deadly but can carry an entire hungry nation on its shoulders in time of war or need.

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