

Succulent surprise

Gardening, particularly with succulents and other desert plants, remains a popular trend in the United States. Two plants that may be encountered in succulent gardening include the African Milk Tree, also known as the Cathedral Cactus (*Euphorbia Hermentiana*, *Euphorbia trigona*, Abyssinian euphorbia) and the Pencil Tree (*Euphorbia Tirucalli*).

African Milk Tree is a small shrub with a thick green stem similar in appearance to a cactus (however, it is not a cactus but part of a different genus of plants called spurges). Leaves are shaped like a spatula or tear drop and grow along a vertical ridge between pairs of thorns. A pencil tree is a spineless shrub-like plant, made up of long, smooth, green cylindrical branches. Leaves are sometimes found at the tips of the branches. Branches grow upward in a candelabra-like pattern.

The toxic part of these plants is the latex which is found throughout the inside of both plants. Latex is a milky white emulsion used by some species of plants to help with healing injuries and as a defense against insects. Latex differs from plant sap, which is used to carry nutrients to different areas of a plant (*University of Oxford. Plants use latex to harm and heal. 10.10.13*). The latex is very irritating to the skin, eyes, and mouth. It can cause inflammation including burning, redness, swelling and blistering of the skin. Ocular exposure may result in burning, photophobia, foreign body sensation, and pruritus. If ingested, it can lead to pain in the mouth and throat along with nausea and vomiting. Symptoms usually present quickly after exposure and will worsen if the area is not decontaminated. After exposure, the area should be immediately irrigated for 15 minutes. If the latex is swallowed, rinse mouth with water. Thorns from the African Milk Tree can be removed using tweezers or adhesive tape. After flushing the exposed area, further treatment with steroids, antihistamines, or antibiotics may be warranted (*Basak. Indian J Ophthalmol. 2009;57(4):311-3*). Eye exposures need extended follow up with an ophthalmologist. The latex of some spurges has shown antineoplastic activity which can sometimes cause a delay in healing of the cornea. Patients should also be warned that ocular symptoms may worsen before improving (*Scott. Br J Ophthalmol. 1996;80(9):823-6*).

Simple preventative measures are key to avoiding contact with latex. Exposures, particularly to the eyes, commonly occur when gardeners are trimming and moving these plants. If you are going to be handling them, wear long sleeves, goggles, and gloves. Be sure to keep them out of reach of children and pets.

Call your local Poison Center at 1-800-222-1222 for further guidance on these exposures.



Canary Spurge

Did you know?

The plants' Latin names (*Euphorbia*) are derived from the name of the physician of King Juba II (the King who married the daughter of Cleopatra), Euphorbos. Euphorbos discovered other members of this plant family in the Atlas Mountains in Africa.

These plants are related to poinsettias. Despite historical concerns of systemic poisoning, poinsettias contain latex and exposures result in similar effects (allergic reactions and irritation) with spurge plants.

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