

Beautiful but dangerous (poisonous) plant – “Oleander”

In an effort to make the Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI) enjoyable to live in (free from worries that our love ones may be poisoned or may touch dangerous plants), the Department of Environment & Coastal Resources have conducted a research on poisonous and injurious plants in the Territory, and have discovered that many of the familiar ornamental plants in our backyards, public places and parks, hotels and restaurants, and schools which are imported are considered dangerous and poisonous. This is of serious concern to the Department, and the DECR will run a series of press releases to inform and sensitize the public of the potential harmful effects of some of these imported plants.

The first in the series is Nerium oleander L. (N. indicum Mill.) that belongs to family Apocynaceae. It is known by the different names such as Adelfa, Alhelí Extranjero, Laurier Rose, Oleander, ‘Oliwa, ‘Oleana, ‘Olinana, Rosa Laurel, Rose Bay, Rosa Francesa.



This plant is an evergreen shrub that can grow to 20 feet in good soil but seldom reach 6 feet in TCI. Regardless of height, it contains a clear, sticky toxic sap. The long, leathery, narrow leaves are up to 10 inches in length and are opposite or occur in groups of three on the stem. Flowers form in small clusters at the ends of branches and are red, pink, or white. The fluffy winged seeds develop in long narrow fruits (capsules) which are 3/8 inch in diameter by 5 inches long. This plant is native to the Mediterranean and it is widely cultivated outdoors in warm climates and as a tub plant elsewhere.



The whole plant is toxic. It contains toxic compound called Oleandrin, a cardioactive steroid resembling digitalis. Poisoning has been reported from inhaling smoke from burning *Nerium*, use of the sticks to roast marshmallows, and drinking the water in which the flowers have been placed. Poisoning produces clinical findings typical of cardioactive steroid poisoning. Toxicity has a variable latent period that depends on the quantity ingested. Dysrhythmia is usually expressed as sinus bradycardia, premature ventricular contractions, atrioventricular conduction defects, or ventricular tachydysrhythmias. Hyperkalemia, if present, may be an indicator of toxicity.



In view of the toxin from all parts of the plant, it is highly suggested that precautionary steps should be taken in order not to touch the milky sap in handling this plant. It is to the best interest of the public if this plant and other poisonous plants will be totally removed from school grounds or public places such as parks, and roads. Because of the dangers of these plants the Department is appealing to all Landscaping Companies, Hotel Managers, Schools and the General Public to conduct an audit of their yard to determine if there

are any poisonous plants and take immediate steps to replace these plants before it spreads throughout the Islands. The DECR are working in close collaboration with the Environmental Health Department and Customs Department to restrict the importation of this and other poisonous ornamentals into the TCI.

For more information, please contact the DECR Office nearest your place.