



Beware: Poisons

If you own a rabbit it's a good idea to take a regular walk around your home and garage looking at it from a rabbit's eye view to check that everything that could be harmful is stored safely out of reach. It's so easy to leave a paint pot with a loose-fitting lid on the garage floor, or cleaning fluids in the bathroom. Check your garden to see that your pet is unlikely to encounter potentially poisonous plants – both ones you may have planted and wild plants that could have self-seeded. Many familiar house plants are poisonous as well, so always ensure that any pots are kept well out of their reach.

Poisonous plants

There are countless websites listing plants believed to be potentially harmful to rabbits. As you look at them your list of 'poisonous' varieties grows rapidly, so deciding which plants it is safe to have in your garden can be confusing.

Different plants contain different types of chemical compounds and these occur at varying levels depending on a range of factors including the time of the year, the growth stages of the plant and the humidity. Animals may react in different ways to these toxic compounds and just because one species can eat a plant with no problems, do not assume that your rabbit can do the same.

Why are some plants poisonous?

It is believed that being poisonous is a survival mechanism to discourage animals from eating the plant – being good to eat reduces the plant's chances of surviving to reproduce.

Fortunately many toxic plants are unpalatable and so given the choice animals will avoid them, or perhaps only take a little nibble before moving to something more tasty. However in some situations animals may actually eat them, for instance if there are no other suitable foods available, if they are growing closely among acceptable plants, or if they with food placed in a food bowl.

How safe is your home and garden?

Rabbits, like other household pets, are not always aware of what is good for them ... and what they should avoid. So we all need to be vigilant in our homes, sheds, garages and in the garden.

By being aware of what could be poisonous and where dangers lurk we can minimise the risk of our pets falling victim to the many

substances – both natural and manufactured – which we take for granted but which could potentially prove harmful.

There has not been a great deal of research to discover which substances are of specific danger to rabbits, so experts have had to assume that some substances and plants which are known to poison other animals could potentially be harmful if ingested by rabbits as well. Although proven instances of rabbits being accidentally poisoned are rare, it is recognised that figures may not be accurate as it may not always be possible to prove whether a rabbit being ill is the result of it encountering a poisonous substance, or whether there was some other cause. In animals the most common causes of poisoning are pesticides - such as rodenticides, herbicides, insecticides and fungicides – prescribed drugs and plants.

A problem with poisoning in rabbits is that, unlike cats and dogs, they are unable to vomit. This means that ingesting compounds which would usually induce vomiting in other animals may go unnoticed. Not only are rabbits unable to get rid of the poison by vomiting, but because they are caecotrophic, a toxic compound can be recycled through the digestive system.



M Glover

Plants to avoid

This list is not exhaustive, but includes plants which are often found on lists of plants poisonous to pets.

Plants grown from bulbs such as tulips, crocus, daffodils hyacinth,

Agave	Caladium	Bindweed	Comfrey
Aconite	Chrysanthemum	Convulvulus (bindweed)	Dahlias
Amaryllis	Clematis	Celandine	Delphinium (Larkspur)
Anemone	Columbine	Charlock	Dog mercury
Arum	Buttercups (small quantities which may be found in dried hay is safe)	Belladonna (Deadly nightshade)	Ivy berries
Antirrhinum			Figwort
Azalea			



While some owners have reported that their rabbit appears to be unaffected by nibbling plants listed as poisonous, another rabbit (depending on a variety of factors including its state of health or age) may become seriously ill. Eating the occasional leaf from many of the plants listed as poisonous is unlikely to cause problems, but if the rabbit has a one-leaf nibble every day or eats a quantity it may not be good for it.

Most owners state they would prefer to err on the side of caution where the safety of their pet is concerned, and keep their gardens clear of plants thought to be poisonous.

There are several ways of achieving this. You can avoid planting anything that appears on



these lists, or plant them only in high raised beds or tall planters. Alternatively you could erect sturdy fencing to separate your rabbit from any areas where flowers, trees or shrubs are planted – though given the ingenuity of rabbits this is harder to achieve than it may seem. Or you can make a permanent or movable run that you can put on a lawn to confine your rabbit to safe areas of the garden.

Mycotoxins

Mycotoxins are poisons associated with fungi and they can cause problems in many species of animals. Mycotoxins can be found in mouldy feeds and nuts. You should ensure that feed is not kept for long periods and is always stored in an airtight container in a dry place. Make sure that any hay you feed is dry and free from dust and mould.

Chemicals

Chemicals used in the home and in the garden should all be considered as potentially hazardous, so always store them safely away from pets. Clear up any spills immediately – it only takes seconds for a rabbit's paws to become contaminated, and then licked. If you are cleaning don't leave buckets containing cleaning chemicals unattended, perhaps to go and answer the phone – it's so easy for an inquisitive rabbit to tip it over. And don't decant cleaning materials into unlabelled bottles or containers as you will not then know what chemicals the cleaner contains – and this information is vital should your rabbit be poisoned and you need to take the bottle to the vet to identify the correct treatment.

Remember the chemicals and paints that you store in the garage. Antifreeze is particularly dangerous as it has a sweet taste and there have been reports of rabbits being poisoned by coming into contact with it.

Many owners choose not to use garden chemicals if they have pets, but if you do use chemicals such as pesticides or insecticides as sprays, water-on formula, or granules, take great



care. Clear up any spills immediately as the chemical could get on the rabbit's paws or fur. Rabbits could also brush against newly sprayed plants so that the chemical is transferred to the fur, and may later be ingested when the rabbit grooms itself or is groomed by a companion bunny, or granules could adhere to the paws and be ingested during grooming.

Take action

If you think your pet may have been poisoned, don't panic – but take action immediately. Keep your rabbit calm and warm and get to the vet immediately. Take whatever you think may have poisoned your pet with you – in its container if there is one – as this will help your vet decide on the best treatment. If your rabbit swallows poison, or its fur is contaminated by a substance that is toxic, but seems well, still take it straight to the vet as it can take some poisons several hours to produce symptoms.

When you take a rabbit you think may have been poisoned to the surgery you are likely to be asked:

- What you think may have poisoned your rabbit and have you brought it with you?
- Do you know how much of the poison the rabbit has eaten or been contaminated with?
- When, how and where did it happen?
- How has your rabbit behaved since the incident – for example is it wobbly, breathing heavily, or having fits?

Your vet is able to subscribe to the Veterinary Poisons Information Centre which can give them advice about any hazardous toxic substances and potential toxins. They also collect information from each incident to be recorded for future reference and in the process create a valuable resource for veterinary surgeons when they are faced with a poisoned pet. There may be a charge if your vet makes use of the service when treating your rabbit.

Fool's parsley	Iris	Morning glory	Monkshood	Ragwort	Woody nightshade
Foxglove	Jerusalem cherry	Nicotiana	Most evergreen trees	Rhubarb leaves	Yew
Ground elder	Laburnum	Oleander	Wood sorrel	Scarlet pimpernel	
Hellebore	Lupin	Philodendron	Poppy	Speedwell	
Hemlock	Lily of the valley	St John's wort	Potato tops	Spurges	
Henbane	Marsh marigold	Wisteria	Privet	Toadflax	
Horsetails	Meadow saffron	Milkweed		Traveller's joy	