



BACKYARD HAZARDS: WEEDS COMMONLY FOUND IN OUR ENVIRONMENT

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WEEDS

Currently, there is a lack of information regarding plants or weeds, commonly found in our environment that can cause serious harm when ingested, smoked, or rubbed into the skin. Most of these substances are not illegal and could lead to a pattern of use and abuse of other harmful drugs. Research suggests that teen misuse of these weeds and plants is increased when they are in bloom in the spring and summer months.

Teens experiment with drugs for many reasons. First of all, peer pressure is a powerful force during adolescence that can often lead to teens asking other teens to experiment with drugs. During adolescence, many young adults are afraid to face personal problems and believe drugs will enable them to handle their troubles better. Furthermore, teens are naturally curious and search for ways to demonstrate their independence from parents. As a result, teens may not be able to resist the opportunity to experience the 'high' from a common plant or weed growing in their own backyard.

The information presented here is designed to increase awareness of harmful plants and weeds that have the potential to be misused by adolescents. While it is true that some of these backyard weeds have little or no harmful effects when consumed or smoked, others are extremely toxic. Ingesting or inhaling a small amount could be fatal.

■ Hallucinogens

The most common types of drugs that teens can find in their backyard are hallucinogens. These drugs alter a person's senses, causing him/her to see or hear things that do not exist and/or to distort real events and objects. Peyote Cactus, "Magic" Mushrooms, Jimson Weed, Morning Glory seeds and Nutmeg are the most common plants containing hallucinogenic compounds.

The Peyote Cactus



Mescaline is the hallucinogen found in the Peyote Cactus. The peyote cactus is native to Mexico and is common to small areas of Texas. When this hallucinogen is ingested, the psychic effects come on slowly and can last from 10 to 18 hours. The physical effects associated with mescaline include dilated pupils, nausea, vomiting and high fever. Large amounts can cause dry mouth and dry skin, slowing of the heart and breathing, and low blood pressure.

Magic Mushrooms



The psychoactive substance in magic mushrooms is known as psilocybin. Psilocybin is found in more than two dozen different species of mushrooms. These mushrooms are found throughout North and Central America, as well as the United Kingdom.

Estimating dose and strength is difficult because each type of mushroom varies in potency and duration of effects. Typically, the more that is ingested, the greater the LSD-like psychic effects become. At moderate dosage levels, the effects of psilocybin usually appear within 30 minutes of ingestion and can last several hours.

Similar to other hallucinogens, psilocybin produces vivid mental changes and rapid mood swings where users can easily feel overwhelmed by the flood of feelings and perceptions that the drug induces. Dizziness, lightheadedness, nausea, anxiety, shivering and abdominal discomfort are all reported physical effects.



Jimson Weed

Jimson Weed is native to much of the Eastern United States. This plant usually reaches a height of five feet and bears white flowers and prickly seedpods. For the most part, young people who may use the plant are unfamiliar with its side effects. However,

reports of Jimson Weed poisonings usually occur in clusters since adolescents try Jimson Weed with their friends.

Jimson Weed can be infused into tea, smoked, ingested, or ground into a paste and rubbed into the skin. Its active ingredients are atropine and scopolamine, which are substances that interfere with the neurotransmitter acetylcholine. The effects include dilated pupils, blurred vision, high temperature and dry mouth. Large amounts of atropine and scopolamine are highly toxic and may cause brain damage. Confusion and delirium are common symptoms associated with Jimson Weed. Older Jimson Weed plants also contain hyoscyamine, a nerve toxin. Hyoscyamine causes illness immediately after ingestion.

Morning Glory



Found in Southern Mexico and tropical South America, Morning Glory seeds contain ololiuqui, which contains lysergic acid amine. Related to LSD, but only one-tenth as potent, ingestion may cause a 6-hour high, but only if more than 100 seeds are consumed. Intended

as a deterrent during the last few years, most seeds have been coated with insecticides or herbicides to cause significant discomfort when ingested.

Nutmeg



This common household spice may be eaten and/or snorted to obtain its psychoactive effects. Mild euphoria and lightheadedness may result from small amounts. At higher levels, however, effects include rapid heartbeat, agitation, vomiting and hallucinations and an unpleasant hang-over.

■ Other Dangerous Wild Weeds

Wild Lettuce



There are over 100 species of wild and domestic lettuce plants, but only a few are native to the United States. Prickly wild lettuce grows throughout the United States in fields and wastelands. Wild lettuce plants can grow to be five feet tall.

The effects of smoking wild lettuce include mild sedation and feeling "spaced out." This effect is said to be similar, although not as powerful, to that of an opiate. Smoking large quantities of wild lettuce can be toxic.

Henbane



Henbane grows in waste areas and along roadsides in parts of Europe and occasionally in the United States. It is a hallucinogen and

a sedative that contains hyoscyamine and scopolamine. When consumed, Henbane acts on the peripheral nervous system. Symptoms include increased heart rate, dilated pupils, hallucinations and urinary retention.

Hydrangea



Hydrangea may be planted; some grow naturally in a forest or waste area. Ingestion can cause a mild marijuana-like high, nausea, stomach

pain, vomiting and sweating. If large quantities are consumed, a level of cyanide develops that the system can not metabolize.

Madagascar Periwinkle



Although Madagascar Periwinkle does not grow wild in the United States, it could be growing in your backyard as an ornamental plant. It

causes euphoria, hallucinations, and an immediate reduction in white corpuscles, which are cells in your body that fight infection.

If consumed for extended periods of time, Periwinkle could cause skin problems, hair loss, and degeneration of muscle tissue.

Juniper



Juniper is an evergreen that causes immediate agitation and may cause a hypnotic trance when ingested. The entire experience lasts approximately 30 minutes and the user may hallucinate. It is likely that juniper is hepatotoxic, which means it causes damage to the liver.

Nightshade

Nightshade is the common name for a family of herbs and shrubs called Solanaceae. There are three types of nightshade: bittersweet, black, and deadly. Nightshade may be eaten raw or boiled. Poisonous nightshades contain the alkaloids: tropane, pyridine and steroid.

Nightshade plants cause problems in the gastrointestinal tract and may affect the central nervous system. Symptoms associated with Nightshade consumption include abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhea, lack of coordination, weakness, depression, hallucinations, convulsions and possible death.

Black Nightshade



Black Nightshade contains atropine and solanine. Solanine is toxic even in small doses. It lowers body temperature and can cause paralysis, shock and fever. Black Nightshade causes dilated pupils, stomach pain, vomiting and diarrhea.

Other possible effects include respiratory and circulatory depression, headache and delirium.

Deadly Nightshade



Deadly Nightshade is even more toxic than Black Nightshade. Deadly Nightshade contains atropine, scopolamine and tropane. Paralysis can occur from its effects on the central nervous system. Small amounts of this substance can be fatal.

If you would like more information, refer to the following list of useful websites:

- <http://www.oasas.state.ny.us/>
- <http://www.doitnow.org/pages/204/204ch4.html>
- <http://www.nida.nih.gov/MOM/HALL/MOMHALL1.html>
- <http://www.aadac.com>