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# if the birds eat it . . . . it's got to be safe for people!

by Ken Stubbart  
Columbus, Ohio

Somewhere I heard that statement bantered around and like many other truisms expounded by my loving parents, learned teachers, devoted church school teachers, and trustworthy scout masters, it planted itself as indelibly in my brain as if it were a scriptural truth — and if it weren't a scriptural truth, it ought to be for none of these loyal leaders would tell anything that was wrong. Thus with such fine inspirational leaders, I abandoned caution and attacked the challenges of life much the same as a new crop of weeds tenaciously attacks a new plowed garden plot! Then suddenly these bits of wisdom had new rays of scientific light cast on them and my



*The common Dandelion, a safe edible.*

well planted truths were uprooted, or at least challenged by those hoes of truth and knowledge.

Recently one such experience caused me to shake the dirt off the roots of that statement, and for my birds' sake, I am sure that the greens that I feed my birds tomorrow will have been fertilized with today's experiences.

A young friend and I were enjoying each others companionship while we walked the banks of a small creek and knocked over the tall weeds so we could get to the small pebbles and splash them in the water. We sat in the shade of a small tree near a puddle of water and watched the numerous tadpoles that had very recently been a glob of frog eggs. I must admit that for just a moment I wished that my birds could produce that fast! Then my dreams were suddenly drawn back to reality by the breeze tickling my leg with a giant dandelion leaf. I picked it and added it to those we had already picked to feed to the birds. My young friend who is not familiar with birds or what they eat spied a group of lush leaves and picked them to add to his supply of bird feed. The milky sap began to flow from the stem. The birds would surely have eaten those leaves either out of trust in the judgement of their feeder or more probably because they have no other greens available. But then, what difference does it make for "if the birds eat it, its got to be safe". Right? Wrong!

Consider that lush group of leaves that had been picked. It was only a poke weed. And even my old scoutmaster has said that poke was edible. I suppose he also said that it required careful cooking, but like many young people I hadn't remembered that small part. Now, I know that the new green leaves can be very carefully prepared, but that they can also be quite toxic if not carefully prepared. Euell Gibbon's guidebooks provide the necessary precautions. But just to be safe, I'll pass the poke. Now, after a little more cautious study, I find that carefully prepared leaves are in fact edible, but not the roots and berries. But then, who would feed them to their birds?

As a result of this food gathering event, I read a couple of articles on edible and non-edible weeds. I find that there are more than 700 poisonous plants in the Americas. Many of these are along the streams, highways, alleys and yard fences where bird fanciers have been encouraged to gather greens for their birds. One contemporary aviculturist has written that the pollution from the automobile exhausts that is absorbed by or that falls on the leaves of the roadside weeds are not harmful to the birds. Pollutants may not kill the birds, at least not as fast as some of the plants themselves.

So much for poke.

I remember a hog we had. After my mother had prepared a fine strawberry-rhubard pie, I fed the slop — including the rhubarb leaves — to the hog. Yes, I remember a hog we had! That hog had at least been smart enough to avoid the thorn apple or jimson weed whose wide green



*Jimson weed (Datura stramonium) contains toxins that can cause insanity, stupor and death.*

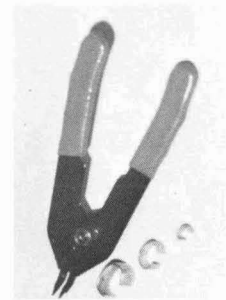
leaves might easily have attracted anyone who believed the truism "the darker green the leaves, the better for the birds". This dark green leafed plant with the large white flowers has an equally colorful history which extends into the pre-Revolutionary War days in Jamestown, Virginia, when the British Troops were attempting to control Bacon's Rebellion. The British Soldiers cleaned and cooked the leaves of the DATURA for greens and found that they had intoxicating effects. This news of the Jamestown weed and its effect quickly spread to other areas and the name was soon corrupted to jimson. Cautious research proves that the toxins of this plant can cause insanity, stupor and death. In fact, it was used by the South American Chibcha Indians to sedate their human sacrifices!

But back to home again where plant poisoning ranks third in poisoning our children in their homes. (Drugs and cleaning agents rank first and second.) One does not have to be alerted only to the toxic plants in the fields, barnyards, and other convenient places. Step out the front door and consider the beauties used for landscaping like the beautiful oleander which is a common houseplant in the north and an ornamental in the south. It contains two toxins that affect the heart and others that upset the intestinal system. The nectar from its white, yellow or pink flowers can poison a crop of honey.

One of the spurge is often planted in the

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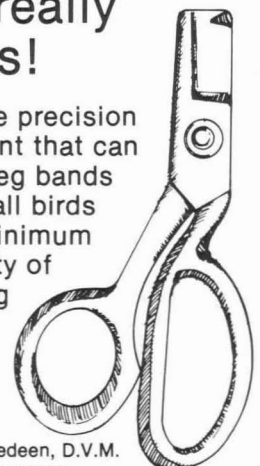
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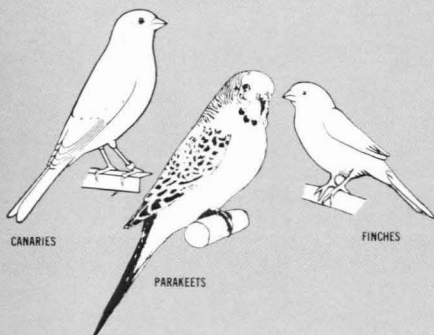


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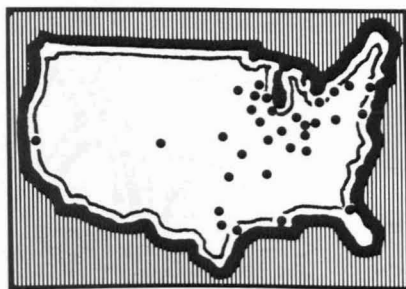
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perennial flower beds. The sap of the Snow-on-the-mountain can cause blisters, blindness or burns. It has been used to brand cattle rather than using the red-hot branding iron. I wouldn't eat or feed my birds anything that harmful — at least not knowingly!

Two beautiful shrubs often used in landscaping are the rhododendron and the mountain laurel. They are too beautiful to be harmful. However the Delaware Indians committed suicide by using poisons from them. The leaf of the Kentucky Coffee Tree can upset the entire digestive system and cause a coma. The fruit of many of the wild cherry family contain cyanide in the pits, as does the seed of the apple. I personally have eaten many chokecherry berries and the meat of their pit, and I will continue to eat the apple — core and all. Which proves nothing at all except that the



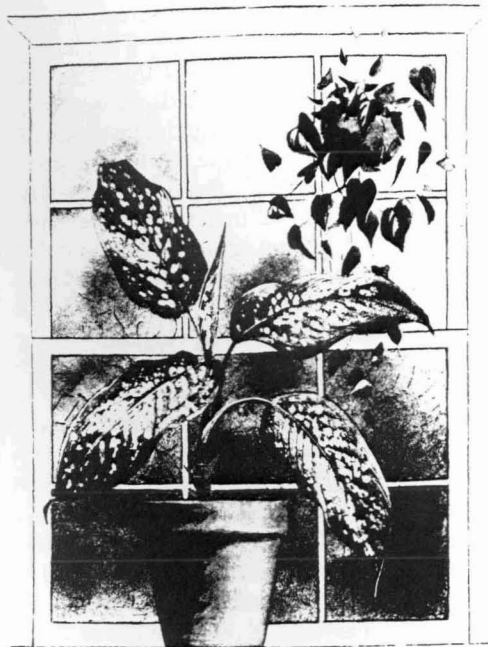
*Chickweed, often a delicacy to birds, extends stems that mat and form dense masses, choking lawn grass.*

toxic dosage level varies with the amount consumed and the animal size and health. It might take a boxcar full of apple seed to kill someone my size. Who knows how many it might take to kill a canary?

The beautiful plants that grow in abundance out-of-doors can make a healthy meal for our birds but how about the house plants that are grown in the birdrooms to raise the humidity during the breeding season?

Earlier, I mentioned my loving mother. She is the one who trained me to enjoy the song of the canary and to care for the house plants — many of favorite plants would have killed the canaries if the birds had been allowed to eat the leaves. Nonetheless, I still enjoy the philodendrons, caladiums, dieffenbachias and poinsettias, and carefully keep their poisonous leaves out of the range of my birds.

Along with my early training and the experiences of raising birds has come caution in experimenting. I cautiously fed parsley to one bird and found it did her no harm — but she didn't like it. I was also



*Dieffenbachia (lower) and Philodendron, two common house plants with poisonous leaves.*

told that if I fed frozen greens to my birds that they would die. They don't. But they don't like frozen greens. I've tried feeding members of the cole family (Brussel's sprouts, broccoli, cauliflower, etc.) to my birds. They don't particularly like them, but they are convenient greens after the frost takes those greens that the birds do like.

Greens, like any other item of the canary's diet, require careful consideration by the conscientious breeder of canaries. The plant, what may be on the plant's leaves, the toxic and nutritional content in the plant, and the condition of the leaf itself are all important to those little captive creatures. It is important to us what our birds eat. After all, weren't birds kept by the various royalty as tasters of the royal diet? If the birds survived than the dish was fit for the king!

Now, after hiking many hills and cautiously watching out for snakes, poison ivy and an occasional ferocious dog or bull, I find my birds are getting fed the old-stand-by greens. From the field I feed dandelion, lamb's quarters and chickory. From the garden, they get endive, spinach and rape leaves. Lamb's quarters and spinach are the highest in protein, calcium, and phosphorus with endive and dandelion greens ranking high in vitamin A and iron. Knowing this, I spice the birds' diet of greens with variety.

Yes, I try to be cautious about what I feed to my birds. After this last case of poison ivy, getting stuck in the mud and getting shocked on a farmer's electric fence, I vowed that "if the birds eat it, its got to be safe for people!"

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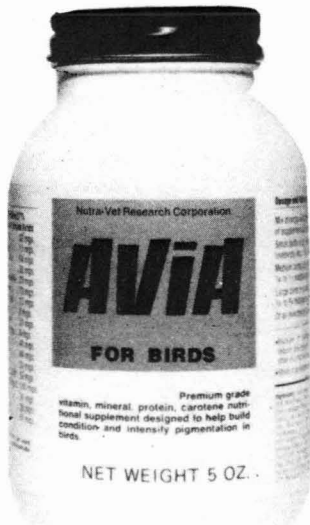
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(See Watchbird, Aug/Sept '82, pg 44 and Feb/Mar '81, pg 21 for article and color reproductions of Eric Peake's work.)

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Canthaxanthin . . . . .	1.8 mgs.
D <sub>3</sub> . . . . .	60 IU
Arginine . . . . .	32 mgs.
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