



## Ask A Master Gardener Q & A

### Nightshade (*Solanum ptycanthum*)

Q. I have a 14 month old who puts everything in her mouth. A neighbor of mine saw a weed growing in the back of our yard and said we should tear it out immediately because it was “deadly nightshade.” It was about two feet tall, spreading out and growing in some bushes we have. The branches were sort of purple in color and some of them had small berries on them. Is that the poisonous part?

A. It sounds as if you are referring to Eastern black nightshade (*Solanum ptycanthum*), which is a common weed in Northern Illinois. Deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*) is a relative that is a rather attractive plant with purple flowers. It also has berries that are poisonous but they are the size of cherries. That plant is cultivated in some gardens. That is why we like to use the scientific name for these plants.

Eastern black nightshade is adapted to living in sunny and shady locations. Their oval-shaped leaves are slightly hairy and are green on the upper side and purple underneath. The stems are also purple.

After they flower they produce clusters of berries on the end of the stems. These berries are poisonous so your neighbor was correct in advising you to get rid of them before your child ingests them. The poison in the green berries can cause paralysis and has resulted in the death of some individuals.

The best way to get rid of the plants is to wear gloves and pull them out of the ground. If they are growing in bushes you want to get the roots out. Pulling the stems will not work. The stems will break and the roots will remain and continue to grow. Try to get rid of the plants before they start to produce seeds because each berry contains between 15 and 60 seeds. According to one estimate a healthy plant can produce up to 800,000 seeds. The seeds are widely distributed by birds so you don’t know where they will pop up.

Illustration source: [http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/~vista/html\\_pubs/WEEDS/162.html](http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/~vista/html_pubs/WEEDS/162.html)

NIGHTSHADE FAMILY, *Solanaceae*



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