

SEEDS FOR MALAWI REPORT

Compiled by Susan Evans – March, 2010

My Experience with Deer-Resistant Plants

by Arlene Ommundsen



Part Two of Four

One of the most successful ways of gardening in areas of high deer density is to use well-known plants that are poisonous.

Colchicum, often called autumn crocus or naked lady, is protected by the highly toxic chemical colchicine. This plant produces leaves in the spring, which die down in the heat of the summer, leaving the flower to shine on its own in the fall.

The genus *Daphne* includes a number of lovely plants known especially for their beautiful fragrance. They are protected by mezerein, an acrid resin. *Daphne mezereum*, though not evergreen, is prized for its early spring flowers before the leaves appear. *Daphne odora 'aureomarginata'* and *D. x burkwoodii 'Carol Mackie'* are both evergreen and variegated. *Daphne laureola* is considered a noxious weed in certain areas.

Members of the comfrey family, Boraginaceae, contain varying amounts of protective alkaloids. These plants include the common forget-me-not, *Myosotis sylvatica*. The large-flowered comfrey *Symphytum grandiflora* makes a lovely ground cover under trees and is very drought-tolerant. Creeping comfrey, another *Symphytum* species, does well in sunny areas and is also drought-tolerant. *Trachystemon orientalis* has large leaves like a hosta but may drop them in a cold winter, sending up its blue flower spikes before the new leaves appear. Most of these plants are less than 12" high and have blue or blue and white flowers.

Probably all of us have had the common foxglove, *Digitalis purpurea*, make an appearance in our gardens or have encountered it at the edge of the forest. Some of the other *Digitalis* species do not appear to be as toxic and may be eaten by deer.

Two spectacular plants that require a little more care, or can

be treated as annuals, make a lovely focal point in the garden. They both contain alkaloid poisons and must be treated with respect. *Ricinus communis*, the castor bean plant, grows very fast. Shrub-like, this annual herb with red-purplish stems and large leaves contains most of the poison in its seeds. Angel's Trumpet or *Brugmansia x candida* is a long-lived, woody tree or shrub, with large, fragrant, pendulous flowers. It is generally not hardy in our climate and must be protected for the winter, but that is well worth the trouble.

The euphorbias, which include the poinsettia, have a latex-like sap. The various species contain differing amounts of many di- or tri-terpen esters, which are caustic to the skin and mucous membranes. I have found euphorbias to be avoided by the deer with the exception of poinsettias and *Euphorbia robbiae*. Robb's euphorbia is very invasive as well so I wouldn't recommend it. One of my favourites is *Euphorbia characias ssp wulfenii*. It will grow in full sun but will take partial shade and is very drought-tolerant and evergreen. When pruning these plants it is a good idea to wear eye protection.

Certain poisonous plants are not appropriate if small children frequent your garden. In the next installment I will discuss examples of other plants not preferred by deer.

Happy gardening!

News from Malawi

On February 6, 2010 Delirah Phiri emailed an update on happenings in the project. It has been edited for clarity.

This year we have helped 95 people with farm inputs instead of 50 [in the budget] because the price of fertilizer came down. But when schools opened for this year we were told that fees had gone up.

The results for our school beneficiaries who sat for their final year are out, and we are happy to let you know that most of them have done well. On nutritional support, all our 21 beneficiaries are well.

We are having good rains here in Mzuzu and we hope for good yield. We applied for a ground phoneline to help sort out our communication [with you]. Teddy is doing well, Vincent and Gilda are fine. More next time.

Delirah

S4M SEEDS AVAILABLE IN GANGES

Our S4M vegetable and flower seeds are available in Ganges at the **SOLID Exchange** beside the library. It is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. These seeds were collected from Susan's garden and include many lettuces, bok choy, chards, kale, cilantro and tomatoes as well as native fawn lilies and camas. Support food security in Africa while you grow your own food in the beauty of your wildflower meadow.