

Take care with teas

For years sassafras tea was used as a mild stimulant. It was also used to flavor root beer, but it was banned in 1960 when the FDA found it contains a naturally-occurring cancer-causing substance called safrole.

"Just because something has been used for many years and is 'natural' does not mean that it is safe," points out Dr. Robert Brackett, extension food safety specialist, North Carolina State University.

Spring tonics and natural cures cause problems for people every year. "It may be tempting to go out and pick herbs for a tea 'like Grandma used to make,'" but Grandma recognized many of these herbs as medicines," Dr. Brackett says.

Plants which can cause problems for some people when brewed into a tea include:

--Chammomile, which has caused life-threatening anaphylatic reactions in people allergic to ragweed, asters or chrysanthemums. These people should also avoid teas made from the flowers of goldenrod, marigold and yarrow.

--Senna, aloe, buckthorn and dock, which can cause severe diarrhea.

--Large quantities of licorice tea can cause sodium retention, potassium loss, severe diarrhea and high blood pressure.

--Burdock, catnip, juniper, hydrangea, jimson weed, comfrey, shave grass, horsetale and juniper berries also bother some people.

Ginseng, sold widely as a tonic, stimulant and aphrodisiac, can also cause unpleasant side effects.

"Even pure ginseng can contain estrogen compounds which can cause the opposite of the desired effects," Dr. Brackett says.

'Heavenly Bamboo'

Nandina, long a favorite as a foundation plant, is becoming more popular as an accent plant or specimen plant for containers. It's widely grown throughout North Carolina.

Some people call it "Heavenly Bamboo." N.C. Agricultural Extension Service specialists say that the plant is a native of China and is a member of the bayberry family.

Nandina grows as a mass of upright, unbranched stems. The leaves will range from deep green in shady locations to a light green or reddish purple in the sun. It blooms in mid-spring but has only moderately showy white flowers. The shrub is most appreciated for its bright red berries in the fall of the year.

For best results, plant Nandina in partial shade. Try to select rich soil with good drainage. Don't plant Nandina between curbs and sidewalks because the soil temperature will be excessively high.

After several years, the plant will become "leggy," and the inner canes or stems should be removed near the ground level.

The extension specialists at North Carolina State University suggest that Nandina should be used more in landscaping. It makes an excellent showing when planted against a screening fence or stucco wall.

Nandina is one of the most disease and insect resistant of all evergreen shrubs.

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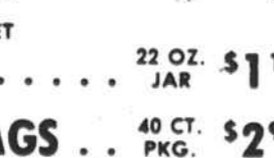


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