

# Take proper precautions with poisonous plants on Okinawa

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CAMP FOSTER — Okinawa is covered with a wide variety of exquisite vegetation. However, some of the island's beauty can be hazardous to one's health.

Elephant's ear, oleander, sea mango, sago palm and wax tree are five types of poisonous plants commonly seen on Okinawa.

Poisonous plants affect people in two ways, through contact and ingestion, according to Mitsugu Sugiyama, an engineering technician with the Environmental Affairs Branch, G-F, facilities, Marine Corps Base Camp Butler.

"The wax tree, which affects one through contact, produces poisonous oil and is often seen in the woods on Marine Corps installations, as well as military family housing," said Sugiyama.

Symptoms caused by contact with the wax tree include severe itching, reddish-colored inflammation or noncolored bumps, and blistering of the skin. Emergency treatment is to wash the poisonous oil away as soon as possible.

While the wax tree is hazardous through contact, some of the vegetation on Okinawa is dangerous if ingested.

"The sago palm is poisonous from ingestion of the fruit," said Sugiyama. "All parts of the plant are poisonous and contain several different types of toxins."

Ingestion of sago palm fruit can cause nausea, vomiting without fever, diarrhea and possibly death. Emergency treatment is to drink plenty of water and induce vomiting.

Two other hazardous plants are the oleander and sea mango.

"The oleander and sea mango are extremely poisonous to both humans and animals, as they contain numerous toxic compounds," said Sugiyama. "The entire plant, including the white milky sap, is toxic, and it can cause nausea, vomiting, excess salivation, diarrhea and irregular heart rate."

In case of ingestion, emergency treatment is to induce vomiting. In case of skin contact, sap should be washed away immediately.

Although some of these plants look harmless, such as the elephant's ear, they may cause serious health issues.

"The elephant's ear contains calcium oxalate in the entire plant, including the sap," said Sugiyama. "If ingested, the oxalate crystal can cause burning and swelling of the mouth and throat. Contact with the sap can cause skin irritation."

In case of ingestion, emergency treatment is to induce vomiting, and in the case of skin contact, the sap should be washed away.

Wearing long sleeves, long pants, boots and gloves provides protection from these poisonous plants, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The CDC also explains how using barrier skin creams, such as a lotion containing bentoquatam, may offer some protection before contact.

Also, do not burn plants that may be poisonous, as inhaling smoke from burning toxic plants can cause severe allergic respiratory problems, according to the CDC.

For more information on dealing with poisonous vegetation, contact the Preventive Medicine Department of the U.S. Naval Hospital on Camp Lester at 643-8011, or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).