

Attack of the killer tomatoes: Debunking the myth

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For close to a decade now, I have travelled near and far teaching children the joys of gardening. As we all know, kids can say some pretty crazy things. Their developing imaginations can create stories that would put Steven Spielberg out of business. However, through all of my school visits, the one tale which disturbs me the most comes from the adults. It entails something along the lines of: "tomato plants are dangerous and should not be in gardens accessible to children..." I hear it at least once a month from concerned care givers who are trying to provide a safe environment for their children. There is also a belief that this is a requirement for licensing and any trace of a growing tomato plant can put a centre in jeopardy. The simple fact is that THIS IS NOT TRUE.

The tomato belong to the nightshade family (Solanaceae, scientific name), this family also includes common kitchen varieties such as potatoes, eggplants and capsicums. As with many plants, the leaves and stems contain a small level of toxin. These levels are too low to cause any harm if consumed and it is said that a huge quantity of leaves would have to be digested in order to cause any ill effects. This goes for almost any other plant that you eat, which shouldn't be eaten, and of course the ripened tomato itself is completely fine.

My company, Little Green Thumbs, has provided the "tomato patch program" to over 200,000 children over the years. Working with schools, childcare, shopping centres and other businesses, I have managed to encourage a sense of ownership of this simple plant. From potting a seedling to harvesting its fruit, the children are excited about the part they have played in its lifecycle. With this, a healthy respect for the environment and nutrition can blossom. So it breaks my heart when I hear that a centre has had to pull down their veggie garden in fear of not complying with state regulations. The truth is, the office for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) have always relied upon information from the Poisonous Plants and Fungi list compiled by the Queensland government (Qld Health), which makes no mention of tomato plants - therefore, it is not a licensing requirement and tomato plants are OK within a childcare setting. I have also discussed this matter with Tony Bean, the Curator of the Solanaceae family, Queensland herbarium. Tony, like myself was quite interested in putting this myth to rest and has laughed of the notion of a "tomato disaster". Kidsafe Qld have also experienced the many rumours and questions relating to this matter. As with ECEC, Kidsafe base their information on fact and credible reports, and dismiss any thoughts about taking tomato plants out of early education facilities. It seems though these days that "credible" can be sourced from any blog or search engine on the internet, and thus begins the rumours and whispers which impacts on us all.

Some might say that these are a lot of words for one simple plant, or that I even have a vested interest in protecting its reputation. The bottom line is that within this age of fingertip information, we are taking on board a multitude of opinion over fact.

Mix in the fear of legal liability and people might start to find it “safer” to remove experiences at the risk of possible incidence.

Some of our world’s brightest and remarkable talents came to be through a series of risk taking and problem solving. They suffered a few bumps and bruises, and may have even grown a humble tomato plant. So when it comes to safety, rather than taking random information as gospel, we should only rely on credible and relevant sources as well as referring to our good old friend- common sense.

Resources and Acknowledgements

Little Green Thumbs,

<http://www.littlegreenthumbs.com.au/>

Susan Teerds, Kidsafe Queensland,

<http://www.kidsafeqld.com.au/>

Tony Bean, Queensland Herbarium,

<http://www.ehp.qld.gov.au/plants/herbarium/>

Poisonous plants and fungi list (Qld Health),

http://www.health.qld.gov.au/PoisonsInformationCentre/plants_fungi/default.asp