

ATTACK OF THE ARISAEMAS!

Febrin LePadden

A few nights ago, I decided to sort out the spikes of *Arisaema* berries which had been ripening in various dishes in the kitchen. Rather irritatingly, most *Arisaema* plants just collapse at the end of the season, with the result that the spikes of berries end up lying on the ground, where slugs eat the flesh and leave the seeds behind. This may seem like a convenient way of getting clean seeds without any effort, except that the seeds inevitably find their way in to cracks and crevices in the soil and are lost. The only things to do is to cut off the spikes and allow the seeds to ripen in trays or dishes inside the house, or on a sheltered windowsill outside. Unlike many other berries, they colour up beautifully, even if they are green when the spikes are removed. Their viability is not affected, as far as I can tell.

Having decided that this year's berries were as ripe as they would ever be, I started to detach them gently from the central stalk, much as one shucks sweetcorn from the cob. After a while, I realised that my throat was getting sore. I suddenly recalled an incident that occurred in the autumn of 2015. I immediately made sure to complete the task standing up, with the dishes of berries at arm's length. Later, I located an entry in my garden diary from 2015 which described the previous incident in detail:



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Arisaema candidissimum



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Arisaema ringens seedhead

29th October, 2015 ...I was not in bed until after midnight last night. I awoke this morning at 8am, and immediately began to feel really ill: very dizzy indeed, and rather sick. As the morning went on, I had several moments when I feared I was going to black out. Was not able to contemplate eating or drinking anything. Tried to sleep sitting on the bedroom floor with my back against the bed, and dozed a little now and then. At about 1pm, I forced myself to go out to the local shop to get Lucozade, the only thing I thought I could stomach; home again, I felt better after a small glass. In the evening I risked a light meal, which went down well - and now I'm going to get an early night.

After that evening of the 28th, it was several days before I suddenly realised what had almost certainly happened. The evening before, I had been pulping berries of woody nightshade (*Solanum dulcamara*) in a small dish of water to extract the seeds. Very stupidly, I had been sitting at the kitchen counter,

bending over the dish, and had even been aware of the strong, rank odour of the crushed berries, so reminiscent of the smell of potato haulm. It hadn't occurred to me that I was poisoning myself. My lack of caution may have been because I'm aware that woody nightshade is far less poisonous than deadly nightshade, and - unusually - the berries are less harmful when red ripe than when they are green. But I was being too casual, and paid for it with a very unpleasant episode of dizziness and nausea the following day.

I should have remembered the woody nightshade incident, even before I'd begun to sort out the Arisaema spikes, and realised that the berries of Arisaemas - as members of the Aroid family, along with Arums - were likely have many of the same properties as nightshade berries.

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