

Q: Are the berries of Heavenly Bamboo poisonous?

A: Heavenly Bamboo is the misleading name of *Nandina domestica*, a member of the Berberidaceae Family from Asia. Misleading, as the plant is not a bamboo, nor in some states are some of its attributes very heavenly. Nandinas are common landscape plants in this area, tolerant of most soils, sun and shade. Their tri-pinnately compound leaves are lacy in appearance, green in summer and shades of red in winter. The leaves remain all year, white panicles of small flowers bloom in the spring, and cluster of red berries appearing in winter. The larger plants can reach to 8' in height, while lower varieties may stay around 12" The plants spread by rhizomaceous suckers, slowly creating large colonies. *Nandina* tends not to be eaten by deer, which is an indication that the plants might be toxic.

Cyanide poisoning has occurred when livestock have eaten the berries, although birds eat the berries without concern. Keep them away from young children or those who might find the attractive bright red fruit interesting enough to put into their mouths. If the plants are in an area where young children might have access to the attractive red fruit, prune off the flower panicles after the spring bloom for several years. The berries have been used in holiday decorations, where they should be kept away from little fingers. Domestic pets do not seem to be attracted to the fruit.

This plant has hit the invasive plant lists in a number of states. It has not been identified as a problem yet in California, but keep a careful watch. If you see *Nandina* suckers appearing in areas where they are not desired, the plant may be spreading out of bounds. *Nandina* cultivars are available, providing height and foliage colors options. A few of the better known cultivars are: 'Atropurea Nana,' 'Filamentosa,' 'Harbour Dwarf,' 'Firepower,' 'Moon Bay' and 'Gulf Stream.'