

Nerium oleander

[Synonyms : *Nerium indicum*, *Nerium lauriforme*, *Nerium odorum*]

OLEANDER (English, German, Swedish) is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native from Cape Verde (off West Africa) to Japan it has fragrant pink or purplish (occasionally white) flowers.

It is also known as *Adelfa* (Spanish), *Aloendro* (Portuguese), *Arali* (Singhalese, Tamil), *Araliya* (Singhalese, Tamil), *Bitter laurel*, *Bunga jepun* (Malay), *Cevadilha* (Portuguese), *Common oleander*, *Difley* (Arabic), *Khaza-leh* (Persian), *Laurier-Rose* (French), *Laurose* (French), *Loendro* (Portuguese), *Nerie* (Danish), *Nérion* (French), *Nerium* (Swedish), *Oleandr* (Czech), *Oléandre* (French), *Oleandro* (Italian), *Oljandru* (Maltese), *Pikrodáphne* (Greek), *Psorakia* (Greek), *Rhoddodáphne* (Greek), *Rose-bay*, *Rose laurel*, *Rosenlager* (Swedish), *Wild oleander*, and *Yi to* (Thai); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of beware.

The tiny fluffy brown-tufted seeds are dispersed by wind.

Warning – all parts of the plant are extremely poisonous (especially the flowers and nectar) – and even smoke from burning branches. Oleander taken internally can cause abdominal pain, breathing difficulties, dizziness, drowsiness, increased pulse rate, severe gastroenteritis, vomiting, irregular or weak heartbeat, paralysis and coma within a few hours and usually within 24 hours death. It is as poisonous for most animals.

Oleander is derived from an Italian name for this species *oleandro* and possibly the genus name *Olea* (olive) with reference to the olive-like leaves.

This extremely poisonous plant has been used in criminal poisoning. Yet despite its even then known narcotic nature the Greek philosopher, Theophrastus (c.372-c.287 BC), contended that the dried root has the fragrance of wine and improves one's temper when added to wine. As he succeeded his father as king of Macedonia in 336 BC, Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) became embroiled in his Persian campaign during which much of his army was incapacitated. Many of the horses were poisoned when they drank water contaminated with oleander leaves left by the retreating enemy and some of his men were unable to fight after they had skewered their meat with oleander sticks. The bark is still used in parts of southern France as a rat poison.

Oleander's lethal nature was not only familiar to the ancient Greeks but to the Romans as well. The 1st Century Roman natural historian, Pliny the Elder described the plant's appearance and properties.

It is understood that in the 1960s, at least for Hawaii, oleander is considered to have made a significant contribution (accidentally) to fatal or near-fatal poisonings there, whether of man or domestic animal. Authorities note that although rare oleander poisoning can still be reported in Australia. Even as recently as 1986 one instance describes how the leaves of a eucalyptus species and of oleander were confused and an infusion of the latter was taken in error with fatal consequences.

Apparently oleander is a familiar sight along highways (and in public gardens) in south-eastern North America – as are prominent notices warning of its dangers.

Oleander had been introduced to Britain before 1596 as records show that it was blooming then in the garden of the English barber-surgeon and herbalist, John Gerard (1545-1612).

Medicinally, it has been used for abortions, and to treat heart failure and fluid retention. Today it can be used in remedies for some skin diseases – and occasionally for snake bites.