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PLANTS WITH DANGEROUS SPINES OR THORNS

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Climatic conditions in Florida are favorable for growing many tropical, subtropical and even some northern plants. Many plants are native while many more have been introduced from other lands. A great number of the introduced plants contain toxic agents causing stomach poisoning or skin rashes. Some are armed with dangerous spines or thorns capable of causing serious puncture wounds, scratches or abrasions as well as blindness if a person or animal should come in contact with them. The "Citrus Eye Disease," a fungi species of *Fusarium* and *Cephalosporium*, is an example. If a citrus worker's eye is struck or brushed by a twig or branch of the tree, infection that sets in may cause blindness.

Many plants with spines or thorns are included in landscaping home grounds. Spines or thorns are imperfectly developed, leafless branches of woody plants which taper to a fine point. Spines often are produced in leaf axils, but may also develop at the apex or tip of a large leaf. Examples are *Yucca* spp. and *Agave* spp.

Some spines are straight and others are curved or hooked. The latter is common on leaves of palms—*Washingtonia*, native palmetto and *Acoelorrhapha wrightii* (Paurotis).

Spines may also vary in shape, size, rigidity, thickness, length and location on plant. Other structures not classified as spines or thorns, that are capable of causing irritation if handled or brushed against are "burs" and "awns."

Burs occur on the exterior portion of seeds or fruits. Examples are sweet gum and sandburs. Awns are sharp structures produced on grasses and small grains. These structures are found in seed head region or "glumes" of plants—often labeled the "beard." Barley, rice, wheat and other grains have such structures.

The following plants have spines or thorns on some portion of the plant.

Acacia spp.; Family: *Leguminosae*. Acacias are small trees or shrubs grown in central and south Florida. Most species have yellow globular flowers. Foliage varies from delicate feathery types to broad, large forms. A number of species have strong stout spines, others needle-like spines varying in length. Spines are located along trunk and branches.

Agave Americana (Century Plant); Family: *Amaryllidaceae*. *Agave* is found in many homegrounds throughout the state. It has large, thick, silvery-gray leaves up to 6 feet in length and 7-8 inches wide. When plant is 10 years old, it produces a very tall flower spike with greenish flowers. Shortly after flowering, plant shrivels up and dies. Tip of leaf has a dark, stiff spine. Leaf margins are also armed.

Aloe spp.; Family: *Liliaceae*. A low growing succulent plant grown in central and south Florida and used as an ornamental. It produces bright red or yellowish flower

spikes. Leaves are mottled with green background and white blotches, and contain stiff, spiny-toothed margins. Foliage is used for burns and other skin ailments.

Amaranthus spinosus (spiny amaranth, pigweed); Family: *Amaranthaceae*. A common weed in cultivated soil. Leaves are light green; flowers unattractive on a spike. Spines are approximately one-half inch in length and are located in leaf axils.

Araucaria Bidwilli (Monkey puzzle tree); Family: *Araucariaceae*. A tall, evergreen tree with spiral branches, glossy dark green leaves and large cone shaped fruit. Plants are grown in central and south Florida. Leaves have sharp tips. When dry, leaves harden and spiny tips are more dangerous.

Asparagus Sprengeri; Family: *Liliaceae*. A vine or ground cover with short, narrow leaves. Flowers are small, pale pink in color and fragrant. Mature fruit is a red berry. Sharp scale like structures are located along branches.

Bombax malabaricum; Family: *Bombacaceae*. A large tall tree grown mainly in south Florida. Leaves are deciduous, compound, up to 7 inches long. Large red flowers are produced during winter. Tree trunk is covered with stout spines. As tree gets older, spines lose some of their sharpness.

Bougainvillea spp.; Family: *Nyctaginaceae*. Large evergreen vine with colorful flowers (bracts) during most of the year. Plant is grown in Central and South Florida. Branches are armed with strong, long, sharp spines.

Cacti spp.; Family: *Cactaceae*. This large family contains more than 1300 species. Most plants are succulent with inconspicuous leaves. Plants vary greatly in size and shape. Many species produce large, attractive flowers and berry-like edible fruits. Spines cover most of plants surface.

Carissa spp. (Natal plum); Family: *Apocynaceae*. Several carissas are used as landscape plants, in central and south Florida. They are available in low growing ground covers to large, tall shrubs. White star shaped flowers produce plum-like edible fruits. Leaves are dark green, reniform or kidney-shaped and contain milky sap. Double spines are located at leaf axils or joints.

Citrus spp.; Family: *Rutaceae*. Most citrus is grown for its edible fruit; a few for ornamental purposes. Flowers are primarily white, but may have a reddish tinge when in bud stage. Leaves are glossy, dark green, and usually with a winged petiole. Spines are two or more inches in length, especially on juvenile growth and water sprouts. Short spines may be found on older growth.

Crataegus spp.; (Hawthorn); Family: *Rosaceae*. A shrub or small tree grown mostly in north Florida. Several native species are also available. Flowers are white, not too fragrant and produce small apple-shaped fruits. One inch spines are present along branches.

Chaenomeles japonica; (Flowering quince); Family: *Rosaceae*. A deciduous shrub grown primarily in north Florida. Flowers are orange-red, fruit is yellow and edible. Spines are located at leaf axils.

Duranta repens; (Golden dewdrop); Family: *Verbenaceae*. A large, evergreen shrub with cascading branches and

toothed leaves. Flowers are lilac in color produced in cascading clusters. Fruit is a golden-yellow berry which is claimed to be poisonous. Branches contain spines up to one inch in length.

Elaeagnus pungens; (*Silver thorn*); Family: *Elaeagnaceae*. An ornamental shrub with pale green foliage above, and silvery beneath and covered with many small brown spots. New growth is rapid and viny. Plants are grown in all parts of the state. Flowers are inconspicuous and occasionally produce fruit. Branches are armed with spines one inch or more in length.

Erythrina herbacea; (*Cherokee-bean*); Family: *Leguminosae*. A low growing, deciduous, native plant. Bright red, pea-shaped flowers, are produced on tall spike in late winter before leaves appear. Sharp spines are located along branches and midrib of foliage.

Euphorbia splendens; (*Crown-of-thorns*); Family: *Euphorbiaceae*. Low growing ornamental plant with colorful red or pink waxy flowers. Plants are used in central and south Florida. Stems of plants are completely covered with sharp one-inch spines.

Ilex opaca (*American holly*); Family: *Aquifoliaceae*. A native evergreen shrub or small tree. Leaves are leathery, glossy, dark green, and contain sharp teeth. Flowers are small, white and produce red berries.

Lantana camera; Family: *Verbenaceae*. This evergreen plant attains a height to four feet. Flowers are yellow-orange changing to red or white. Drupe fruits (berry like) turn a dark blue color when mature and are considered toxic. Stems of plants are covered with many short spines.

Liquidambar styraciflua (*Sweet-gum*); Family: *Hamamelidaceae*. Sweet gum is a large, native, deciduous tree. It thrives in moist soils in north and central Florida. Leaves resemble maple leaves and young twigs contain corky, winged bark. Fruit is round about one inch in diameter, and covered with spines.

Palms spp.; Family: *Palmaceae*. A number of palms have long spines along portions of leaf petioles. Included in this group are Date palms (*Phoenix* spp.), which have feathery leaves and Washington, Palmetto and Acoelorrhapha (*Paurotis*) which have fan-shaped leaves. Some spines are several inches long, and some are hooked.

Parkinsonia aculeata; (*Jerusalem thorn*); Family: *Leguminosae*. A small deciduous tree with long, linear leaves. This plant is grown in most areas of the state. Flowers are yellow and produce pea-like seed pods. Green branches are armed with short, sharp spines.

Poinciana pulcherrima (*Dwarf poinciana*); Family: *Leguminosae*. An evergreen shrub or small tree. Terminal flowers are yellow-orange in color, and used for landscaping in central and south Florida. Trunk and branches of plant are covered with short stout thorns.

Pyracantha coccinea (*Firethorn*); Family: *Rosaceae*. Firethorn is a viny evergreen shrub with small glossy leaves. Plant is grown in all parts of state. Flowers are white and

fruit is an orange-red berry. Strong spines are present along trunk and branches of plant.¹

Rosa spp. (*Rose*); Family: *Rosaceae*. Roses are very common ornamental vines and shrubs. Flowers are single or double and come in many colors and bicolors. Most flowers are very fragrant. Branches or canes contain few to many stout thorns.

Rubus spp. (*Blackberry*); Family: *Rosaceae*. Blackberries are native vines found throughout Florida. Many plants are cultivated for their black edible fruits. Flowers are single and white in color. Spines are found on leaves and along entire cane or stem.

Severinia buxifolia (*Box orange*); Family: *Rutaceae*. *Severinia* is a shrub used for screening purposes or hedges. Plant produces small white flowers followed by black, pea-size fruit. Green spines over one inch in length are produced along entire branches.

Smilax spp. (*Bullbriar*); Family: *Liliaceae*. Bullbriar or saw-briar are native plants that contain large fleshy tubers beneath soil surface. Leaves are glossy and arrow shaped. Flowers are inconspicuous and fruit a small black berry. Leaves and viny branches are covered with spines.

Solanum carolinense (*horse nettle*); Family: *Solanaceae*. A wild low-growing plant or weed with pale green leaves, white flowers and fruit a blackberry. Leaves and stem are covered with many white hairs that cause a painful burning feeling when touched or brushed against.

Tribulus cistoides (*Puncture vine*); Family: *Zygophyllaceae*. This native ground cover is commonly found along coastal areas. Plant has dark green fern-like leaves and bright yellow flowers. Fruit is round and covered with sharp spines.

Yucca aloifolia (*Spanish Bayonet*); Family: *Liliaceae*. Spanish bayonets are stemless plants with all leaves arising from a central trunk. Leaves may attain a length of 2½ feet and a 3 inch width. Flowers are creamy white and are produced on tall spikes arising from center of plant. Tip of each leaf has a sharp, hard, black, stiff spine an inch or more in length.

Zanthoxylum (*Prickly ash*); Family: *Rutaceae*. A native shrub or small tree with glossy, dark green, fragrant leaves. Small white flowers produce black seeds. Leaves and branches heavily armed with spines.

All of these plants are capable of causing minor to serious injury should someone come in contact with them or mishandle them. Should any of these plants be included in one's landscape, be certain to place them in a location where they will not interfere with traffic. Some plants contain more dangerous spines or thorns than others and should be selected for special uses only. Several in this category are: Agave, Yucca, Cacti and *Severinia*.

Carelessness in selecting a proper planting spot for some of these thorny and spiny plants may result in severe puncture wounds or blindness, should a person or animal come in contact with them.

¹A particularly unpleasant touch is that the points of *Pyracantha* spines tend to break off and remain embedded in the flesh. Ed.