



Garden q & a
STEPHEN BROWN

Wild Coffee Toxic or Not?

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Question: I have been hearing a lot of people say wild coffee can make you sick. I have read that the leaves can be made into a tea but have not read anything about the berries. I recently ate a few ripe wild coffee berries on my last trip to the Caloosahatchee Regional Park and didn't feel sick at all, in fact they were pretty tasty (better than beautyberry). I did not however, eat the fruit. I just ate the fleshy part of the berries. Can you clarify this controversy for us please?

- Kelly, Fort Myers

Answer: Wild coffee, *Psychotria nervosa*, is a shrub native to South Florida, the Bahamas and the Caribbean. It is widely planted. The fruits are small drupes eaten by blue jays, cardinals and other birds and thus the fleshy portion is not toxic to birds. My source on poisonous and irritant plants of Florida does not list wild coffee as being poisonous or an irritant. My other source on Florida Ethnobotany indicates that some past cultures used the leaves for medicinal purposes. Other used it as a "bush tea" when mixed with other leaves. The same source states that seeds, when used as a substitute "coffee," not only taste bad but the mixture gives a profound headache. You have sampled the fleshy part of the fruit and not the seed. If there are toxins in the plant they could possible accumulate in the seeds and in part result in bad headaches. Beware of experimentation.

Stephen Brown is a horticulture agent with the Lee County Extension Service. Submit questions by calling the horticulture desk at 533-7504 between 9 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. or by e-mailing brownsh@leegov.com. Visit his web page at <http://lee.ifas.ufl.edu/hort/GardenHome.shtml> "Garden Doctor" video clips <http://lee.ifas.ufl.edu/Hort/Video.shtml> and flowering trees information at http://lee.ifas.ufl.edu/Hort/GardenPubsA_Z.shtml