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Wicked Plants: Botanical Rogues & Assassins

Northern California Author Amy Stewart's 2009 New York Times Bestseller, *Wicked Plants: The Weed that Killed Lincoln's Mother & Other Botanical Atrocities* comes to deadly life at the Conservatory of Flowers this summer

April 7 – October 30, 2011

SAN FRANCISCO -- Paralysis, strangulation, derangement – these are just a few of the misdeeds of the plant kingdom as chronicled by award-winning author Amy Stewart in her 2009 New York Times Bestseller, *Wicked Plants: The Weed that Killed Lincoln's Mother & Other Botanical Atrocities*. And now, something wicked this way comes. It's mayhem under glass, as the Conservatory of Flowers transforms its Special Exhibits Gallery into an eerie Victorian garden full of Mother Nature's most appalling creations. Building on the fascinating plant portraits in Stewart's book, the Conservatory introduces visitors to living examples of dozens of infamous plants that have left their mark on history and claimed many an unfortunate victim. ***Wicked Plants: Botanical Rogues & Assassins* will be on view April 7 through October 30, 2011.**

"Naturally, there's nothing like a good crime to pique people's interest in plants," says Brent Dennis, Director of the Conservatory of Flowers. "So we are thrilled to be working with our own local author Amy Stewart to bring her entertaining and witty book about botanical rogues and assassins to life."

As visitors enter the exhibition, they find themselves in a mysterious, untended yard behind a ramshackle old Victorian home. Peeking through the window, it's clear that a crime has just taken place. A man is slumped over on a table, a goblet in his lifeless hand, as the lady of the house flees in the background. Crows caw, and a rusty gate creaks. In the overgrown garden, moss covered statues rise up out of an unruly thicket of alluring plants. Beautiful flowers and glistening berries bewitch the eye, but consider yourself warned – these plants have names like **deadly nightshade, poison hemlock** and **white snakeroot**. Here lurk some of the greatest killers of all time.

The exhibition features over 30 species of wicked plants from those with famously scandalous histories to those that grow "innocently" in millions of gardens and homes today. Visitors can

enjoy corresponding excerpts from Stewart's book full of bloodcurdling tales and fascinating facts on signs throughout the gallery.

"I'm very drawn to storytelling as a writer, and I love it that the plant world is full of such drama and intrigue," says Stewart. "Plants nourish us, they feed us, and they provide the very oxygen we breathe – but they also have to defend themselves. I hope people will come away from the exhibit with a new level of respect for the power of the plant kingdom – but I also hope they will be really entertained. The Conservatory exhibit staff turns out to have a very wicked sense of humor, and they've created an exhibit beyond anything I could have imagined."

Wanted for Murder

One of the most infamous offenders on view is the **castor bean**, a dramatic shrub with poisonous seeds, implicated in the 1978 “umbrella murder” of communist defector BBC journalist Georgi Markov. Waiting at a London bus stop, Markov felt a painful jab in the back of his thigh. He turned around in time to see a man pick up an umbrella as he fled. After three days of fever and throwing up blood, he died. The pathologist found hemorrhages in almost every organ of Markov's body as well as a small tiny metal pellet in his leg. The pellet contained ricin, the poisonous extract of the castor bean seed. KGB agents were suspected of the crime, but no one was ever charged with the infamous murder.

White snakeroot, a tall weed found in the woods across eastern North America and throughout the South, took the life of Nancy Hanks Lincoln, mother of Abraham Lincoln. She and several other residents of the small town of Little Pigeon Creek, Indiana succumbed to milk sickness, a condition brought on by ingesting the milk of cattle that had grazed on the plant. Cattle and horses also died in droves. The “disease” was so prevalent in early America that names like “Milk Sick Ridge,” “Milk Sick Cove,” and “Milk Sick Holler” are still attached to places in the South where it was rampant.

Poison hemlock, a plant in the carrot family, is so toxic that it is known in Scotland as “deid men's oatmeal.” Its most famous victim was Greek philosopher Socrates, who, after being convicted in 399 BC of corrupting the youth of Athens, among other offenses, was forced to drink it as his death sentence.

The Menace in Your Garden and Home

Apart from these famously shady plants are many that appear innocent but are anything but. Included in the exhibition are many of the houseplants and common garden plants around us that can deliver nasty surprises from rashes and irritation to sickness and death.

Aconite, commonly known as **monkshood** and found in gardens throughout Europe and the U.S., is so poisonous that Nazi scientists used it as an ingredient for poisonous bullets. The poison paralyzes the nerves, lowers the blood pressure, and then stops the heart. Even brushing against it can cause numbness, tingling, and cardiac symptoms.

Hellebore, also known as **Christmas rose**, is a low growing perennial with dramatic foliage and beautiful blossoms that may well have been the key ingredient in the first case of chemical warfare in recorded history. Some historians believe it was used by a Greek military alliance to poison the water of the city of Kirrha in the first Sacred War (595-585 BC). Other garden-variety killers included in the exhibition include **oleander**, **foxglove**, **larkspur**, **delphinium**, **sago palm** and more.

Poison control centers in the United States got over 1600 calls in 2006 related to poisonings caused by a common houseplant native to South America – the **philodendron**. Eating a leaf could lead to severe abdominal pain, and repeated skin contact can cause serious allergic reactions. **Peace lily**, **English ivy**, **figus** and more of these potentially harmful houseplants are also on display.

Agents of Intoxication

Intoxicating plants are a group of particularly devious villains. **Betel nut**, an addictive stimulant that turns teeth black and saliva red, is chewed by 400 million people around the world. It is thought to lead to an increased risk of mouth cancer and may contribute to asthma and heart disease. **Tobacco**, of course, is a leaf so toxic that it has taken the lives of ninety million people worldwide. Perhaps smokers would think twice if they knew that nicotine is an ingredient of insecticides.

Troublemakers on the Table

And even some of the world's most important food crops contain toxins that require cooking or preparation to be safe. One of the plant kingdom's biggest crime families is the **cashew** family. Cashews are part of a family that includes poison ivy, poison oak and poison sumac. The cashew tree produces the same irritating oil, urushiol. Cashew nuts are perfectly safe, but the shells are not. For that reason, the nuts are steamed open and partially cooked to neutralize the toxin.

Carnivores

The exhibition includes many other natural born killers including a variety of carnivorous plants that make the best of a bad situation. Growing in bogs where the soil is nutrient poor, these plants use a variety of trapping techniques to supplement their diets with insects and even small mammals.

So this summer, don't miss *Wicked Plants* at the Conservatory of Flowers. It's a who's who of botanical rogues and assassins. Meet them if you dare!

Copies of Amy Stewart's many award-winning books will be available through the Conservatory's gift shop.

Media sponsors for *Wicked Plants: Botanical Rogues & Assassins* include KTVU Fox 2, SF Weekly and Flavorpill.

***Wicked Plants: Botanical Rogues & Assassins* is open Tuesdays – Sundays from 10 am to 4 pm and is included with admission to the Conservatory. Admission for San Francisco residents is \$5 general; \$3 youth 12-17, seniors and students with ID; \$1.50 children 5-11; children 4 and under FREE. Admission for non-residents is \$7 general, \$5 youth 12-17, seniors and students with ID; \$2 children 5-11; children 4 and under FREE. The public should call (415) 831-2090 or visit www.conservatoryofflowers.org for more information.**

Related Programming

Mischief and Mayhem in the Garden

May 4, 2011 from 6-7:30 PM

\$5 general public – tickets available online at www.conservatoryofflowers.org

In this lecture and book signing, Rosemary Harris, author of *Dead Head* and the *Dirty Business Mystery* series, president of the New York Chapter of Mystery Writers of America, and a master gardener in Connecticut, walks participants through the history of the garden through the lens of mischief and mayhem. It's a fascinating journey beginning with Adam and Eve and leading to Harris' modern day *Dirty Business Mystery* sleuths. She will also discuss the dirty business of writing and what led her into the garden to find her stories. Book signing included.

Wicked Plants: Lecture with Amy Stewart

June 1, 2011 from 7-8:30 PM

\$10 general public – tickets available online at www.conservatoryofflowers.org

Amy Stewart discusses her research for her bestselling *Wicked Plants: The Weed that Killed Lincoln's Mother & Other Botanical Atrocities* and the fascinating dark side of the plant world. Book signing included.

Wicked Bugs: Lecture with Amy Stewart

October 6, 2011 from 7-8:30 PM

\$10 general public – tickets available online at www.conservatoryofflowers.org

Amy Stewart discusses her newest book *Wicked Bugs: The Louse that Conquered Napoleon's Army and other Diabolical Insects*. Book signing included.

Background: Amy Stewart

Amy Stewart is the award-winning author of five books on the perils and pleasures of the natural world, *From the Ground Up: The Story of a First Garden*, *The Earth Moved: On the Remarkable Achievements of Earthworms*, and the New York Times bestsellers *Flower Confidential: The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful in the Business of Flowers* and *Wicked Plants: The Weed That Killed Lincoln's Mother & Other Botanical Atrocities*. Her new book, *Wicked Bugs: The Louse that Conquered Napoleon's Army and other Diabolical Insects* will be published in May 2011. She has written for the New York Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, and every national garden magazine, including *Fine Gardening*, where she is a contributing editor.

She is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, the American Horticulture Society's Book Award, and a California Horticultural Society Writer's Award.

Amy Stewart's books including *Wicked Plants: The Weed that Killed Lincoln's Mother & Other Botanical Atrocities* are published by Algonquin Books.

Background: Conservatory of Flowers

The Conservatory of Flowers is a spectacular living museum of rare and beautiful tropical plants under glass. From Borneo to Bolivia, the 1,750 species of plants at the Conservatory represent unusual flora from more than 50 countries around the world. Immersive displays in five galleries include the lowland tropics, highland tropics, aquatic plants, potted plants and special exhibits. Opened in 1879, the wood and glass greenhouse is the oldest existing conservatory in North America and has attracted millions of visitors to Golden Gate Park since it first opened its doors. It is designated as a city, state and national historic landmark and was one of the 100 most endangered sites of the World Monuments Fund.

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