

Press release

Confusion between autumn crocus and wild garlic: a fatal case of poisoning reported by the poison control centres

Following a death in the Grand Est region of France, ANSES and the poison control centres are alerting the public to the risks associated with picking and consuming toxic wild plants that have been confused with edible ones, and specifically the risk of serious poisoning associated with autumn crocus.

Autumn crocus (*Colchicum autumnale*) is most often confused with **wild garlic** (*Allium ursinum*), and more rarely with many-flowered garlic (*Allium polyanthum*). These three plants grow in the spring in the same types of undergrowth, especially in France's eastern regions and in Occitania.

In 2019, poison control centres reported 31 cases of exposure to autumn crocus, including four serious poisoning cases. This spring, a death occurred following consumption of autumn crocus mistaken for wild garlic when it was picked and used to prepare pesto.

Eating autumn crocus can lead to serious or even fatal poisoning, depending on the quantity of leaves ingested, the concentration of colchicine in the plant (which varies greatly), and whether it is in combination with certain common drugs (such as macrolide antibiotics and antivitamin K) that can significantly increase the toxic risk. The first clinical manifestations are potentially severe digestive disorders (vomiting and diarrhoea), occurring within hours of ingestion.

How can you tell the difference between wild garlic and autumn crocus?

Wild garlic (ramson) is an edible wild plant, 15 to 40 cm high when mature, with a characteristic garlic smell, especially when its leaves are crushed. Its star-shaped flowers and elongated bulb are both white. The long-stemmed, oval, pointed leaves are glossy to varying degrees. This plant often grows in large carpets in cool undergrowth, in damp shady valley bottoms or along streams. The leaves appear in February-March and the flowers from April to early June. The leaves are picked until the first flowers appear.



Wild garlic



Autumn crocus

Autumn crocus leaves are stiffer and stemless, and its bulb is round and dark. The mauve flowers do not appear until autumn, only the leaves are visible in spring; they are fleshy and round-tipped, and seem to emerge straight out of the ground. All parts of the plant are poisonous.

The Agency's recommendations

If you do pick wild garlic:

- Do not make assumptions: ensure you know which plant you are picking,
- Check that each leaf has a garlic odour when rubbed,
- Do not pick leaves by the armful: avoid gathering different types of plant together as you could mix toxic species with edible ones,
- If you have any doubts about identification, do not eat them!
- Stop eating the leaves immediately if they have a bitter or unpleasant taste,
- Take photographs of the plants you pick for easier identification in the event of poisoning.

If you have any doubts after ingestion or if you experience any digestive or other symptoms within hours of eating a dish containing wild garlic or many-flowered garlic, contact a poison control centre immediately.

Poisoning from confusion when picking edible plants is not uncommon. Each year, the network of poison control centres records about 250 cases of poisonous plants being mistaken for edible plants.

A checklist to help you avoid confusion between edible and poisonous plants is available on the ANSES website:

https://www.anses.fr/fr/system/files/2020-02_aide_memoire-plantes_toxiques.pdf

Poison control centres provide free, 24-hour emergency medical teleconsultations.

For any poisoning situation, seek advice and guidance from a poison control centre before consulting a doctor or going to the hospital emergency department.

- Dial 15 (in France) in the event of a life-threatening condition (coma, respiratory distress, etc.)

24-hour emergency numbers for France's poison control centres:

ANGERS	+33 (0)2 41 48 21 21	MARSEILLE	+33 (0)4 91 75 25 25
BORDEAUX	+33 (0)5 56 96 40 80	NANCY	+33 (0)3 83 22 50 50
LILLE	+33 (0)8 00 59 59 59	PARIS	+33 (0)1 40 05 48 48
LYON	+33 (0)4 72 11 69 11	TOULOUSE	+33 (0)5 61 77 74 47