

OLEANDER FLOWERS

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Context:

Two Kerala government-controlled temple boards, which together manage 2,500-odd temples in the state, have banned use of oleander flowers (locally known as arali) in temple offerings after a 24-year old woman died after accidentally chewing some oleander leaves.

Background:

Oleander's toxicity has been recognised across the world.

About Oleander:

1. Nerium oleander, commonly known as oleander or rosebay, is a plant cultivated worldwide in tropical, subtropical, and temperate regions.
2. Known for its drought tolerance, the shrub is often used for ornamental and landscaping purposes.
3. In Kerala, the plant is known by the names of arali and kanaveeram and is grown along highways and beaches as a natural, green fencing. There are different varieties of oleander, each with a flower of a different colour

References in Ayurveda:

1. The Ayurvedic Pharmacopoeia of India (API), a government document that describes the quality, purity, and strength of drugs used in Ayurveda, mentions oleander. According to API, an oil prepared from the root bark can be used to treat skin diseases.
2. Charka [Charak Samhita] has prescribed the leaves of white-flowered variety externally in chronic and obstinate skin diseases of serious nature including leprosy.
3. Bhavaprakasha has described Karvira [another name of the plant] as a visha (poison) and indicated it in treatment of vrana (infected wounds), kustha (skin diseases including leprosy), krimi (microbes and parasites), kandu (itching) etc
4. Ingestion or inhalation of smoke from burning oleander can be intoxicating. This is due to the properties of cardiac glycosides (a type of chemical) including oleandrin, folinerin, and digitoxigenin, which are present in all parts of the plant.
5. Cardiac glycosides are steroidal compounds capable of exerting pharmacological effects on cardiac muscle. The primary therapeutic value of these glycosides lies in their ability to exert profound tonic effects on the heart [stronger and faster heart contractions].
6. Effects of oleander toxicity include nausea, diarrhea, vomiting, rashes, confusion, dizziness, irregular heartbeat, slow heartbeat, and, in extreme cases, death.