

Castor beans do not immediately leap to mind when one considers the state's most serious problems. And yet bills outlawing the production and transportation of castor beans were among the first filed in anticipation of next year's legislative session. Castor beans, being 50 percent or more oil, are the among the most promising biofuel crops. They are also the source of one of nature's deadliest poisons. Ricin, which can be extracted from crushed castor beans, is so potent a toxin that a dose equivalent to a few grains of salt induces a slow, agonizing death marked by vomiting and diarrhea. Most famously, ricin was used in the 1970s to assassinate a Bulgarian dissident on a London street. A ricin-coated pellet was fired from a gun disguised as an umbrella. More recently, four Georgia men were arrested earlier this month on terrorism charges that included a plan to poison the Atlanta water supply with ricin. But state Sen. Mike Schulz, R-Altus, and Rep. Dale DeWitt, R-Braman, did not have terrorism or espionage in mind when they filed their castor bean bills this fall. They were concerned about a more direct threat - inadvertent contamination of the food supply. "Prohibiting castor beans may not be something we want for the long-range," DeWitt said. "But until we have more research into ways of lowering the ricin levels, we have to be very careful with it." Although castor plants are fairly common as ornamentals, their commercial production is virtually unknown in Oklahoma. With growing interest in them for biofuels, however, wheat growers and other crop producers became concerned about a burst of speculative cultivation spreading castor and ricin residue into fields, planting and harvesting equipment, storage bins and trucks and railroad cars used for transporting grain. "It's a difficult thing when you tell somebody what they can or can't raise," DeWitt said. "But we have to be careful with the castor bean." Randy Krehbiel 918-581-8365 Original

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