



Alkaloids: Chemical and Biological Perspectives

S. William Pelletier

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Volume 8 of this series presents four timely reviews on alkaloids: Chapter 1 is a magnificent and monumental review of curare, "a group of dart and/or arrow poisons varying in composition and featuring muscle relaxation as their basic pharmacological action." The fascinating history of curare is recounted, beginning with early encounters by the Spanish Conquistadores through its use as arrow poisons by the forest tribes in hunting and warfare, its chemistry, ethnography, botany and pharmacology. A terminal section of this chapter treats the development of modern muscle relaxants. This chapter thus traces how curare-initially only a crude plant extract-has given rise to the widely used and very important neuromuscular blocking agents of today. The precise role of plant secondary metabolites and their interactions with insect herbivores have been focal points for research by chemists, botanists and entomologists for many years. Alkaloids and their glycosides are frequently involved as feeding deterrents. Chapter 2 treats the relationships between the chemistry of alkaloids in host plants and the effects that these compounds may have on insect herbivores. Interestingly, an alkaloid produced by a plant may manifest different effects on different insects.

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