

“Solutions for Your Life”



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Poisonous Weeds in Pastures
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Many farmers and ranchers are aware of the plants in their pastures. Most are familiar with the poisonous weeds that may appear from time to time. The truth is there may be poisonous weeds in your pasture right now that you are unaware of.

Traditionally livestock will not eat weeds that are harmful to them when they are in a healthy and well maintained pasture. The livestock begin to snack on these weeds when they are moved into a new area where there are plants present that they are unfamiliar with. Just like humans, cattle are curious creatures. When they see something they are unfamiliar with they are going to test it out. Other times that livestock will try poisonous weeds rather than the green grasses may be in the fall after a frost or in the spring when plants begin to green-up

Other situations where livestock will turn to a poisonous weed may be when animals are on range land and there is a shortage of range for the animals to survive so they will turn to weeds they normally would not eat.

Animals which are receiving rations that are not properly balanced for them may turn to harmful plants and weeds in search of the nutrients they are not receiving. Therefore, it is important to supplement minerals to animals where known deficiencies may occur.

Poisoning from plants or weeds often occurs when pastures are overgrazed or in times of a drought. Overgrazing occurs from having excessive animals grazing on a particular piece of land. During this time animals are looking for forages to meet their needs. When the grass isn't present they turn to other forms of roughage. Some of which tend to be poisonous weeds.

Unfortunately, livestock may inadvertently consume poisonous materials through infested hay. In most cases this occurs when the hay contains pieces of bracken fern or crotalaria. Other situations are when animals eat plant materials on the other side of the fence or through curiosity in a trash pile in the pasture.

Some of the more common weeds that livestock owners should be aware of are crotalaria, lantana, pokeweed, bracken fern, and nightshade. Many of these weeds are also used as ornamental plants in landscaping or for butterfly gardening. Each is unique and has its own characteristics to make them easy to identify.

Crotalaria is also known as showy crotalaria. Crotalaria is also known as rattlebox for the sound the seed pods make when mature or shaken. This weed is seldom found in very wet soils. Traditionally found in fencerows, around buildings, or in an abandoned field. Poisoning can occur in all classes of livestock. Some symptoms that may be observed include bloody feces, loss of appetite, and yellowish discoloration of the visible mucosal membranes, along with gastric hemorrhage in horses. Livestock may die two to nine months following ingestion of the plant material with symptoms not showing up until 7-14 days prior to death. Once symptoms have developed animals rarely recover regardless of treatment.

Lantana is one of the common butterfly plants that can be found in many garden sections of retail stores. Unfortunately, it is also an extremely toxic plant to cattle and sheep. Following ingestion of plant material animals may show lesions on their skin if exposed to the sunlight. Following exposure the skin will become hard, swollen,

cracked and painful. Many have described this as the hide peeling off the animal. Other symptoms that may occur include extreme weakness, bloody stool, loss of appetite, along with partial paralysis of the legs with death occurring within 3-4 days. Treatment for lantana poisoning would be to keep infected animals in darkness or out of sunlight with administration of soft laxatives. Affected skin areas should be cleaned and disinfected with antiseptics and healing ointments. There is traditionally not a large recovery rate once treatment begins.

Pokeweed can grow as tall as six feet in height. The stems are smooth and green and purple in color. Berries on this plant are purple-black in color. All parts of the plants are toxic to all livestock. However, the berries and root are the most poisonous portions of the plant. Symptoms of poisoning occur two hours following ingestion of the plant. The infected animal will exhibit gastric irritation with vomiting, purging, spasms and severe convulsions occurring. Death is the result of respiratory organ paralysis. The suggested treatment is administering bland oils and gelatinous foods.

Bracken Fern is most commonly found in open shady areas, pastures, hammocks, and open woods. Toxicity can occur in cattle, horses and chickens. Animals may inadvertently ingest bracken fern through hay or bedding materials. Symptoms will traditionally develop three to four weeks following material ingestion. Affected animals usually have a high temperature, bloody feces, fast and weak pulse, and labored respiration with death occurring within 48 hours of symptom onset. Treatment for bracken fern poisoning is to administer saline purgatives or linseed oil, while keeping affected animals in a quiet place. If treatment is administered early some animals will recover.

Common Nightshade is also known as black nightshade or deadly nightshade. The stalk and leaves are green with contains white flowers with five petals and a yellow center. Ripe berries are purple or black when ripe. Nightshade grows everywhere except close to salt water. The green leaves and unripe berries are poisonous to all livestock species. Some symptoms which may appear would be weakness with a staggering gait, extreme nervousness, and dilated pupils along with paralysis. Symptoms occur rapidly and with infected animals traditionally found dead, there is no known treatment.

As you can see there are many poisonous weeds that are found in pastures. The best prevention of poisoning is to pull any weed in your pastures that you are unsure of. It is better to be safe. Many people are unaware that most plants used in landscaping are harmful to animals. To protect your investment be proactive and take the time to scan your pastures for weeds and plants that do not belong there. You are the only one who can make a difference in your pastures.

*Information obtained from Plants that poison farm animals by Erdman West and M.W. Emmel. IFAS Bulletin 510A.