

Poisonous Plants – Are Your Animals at Risk?

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Livestock managers, go to great lengths to ensure the health and safety of their animals. High-quality hay and feed are often purchased from great distances to ensure the proper balance of forage and protein so that animals can operate at an optimum level. Therefore, it is troubling to consider the fact that potentially harmful weeds may be growing in the pasture. This discussion will cover the misconceptions of plant poisoning and the most common offenders.

Misconceptions

1. *My animals have never been poisoned.* Animal response to toxic plants is highly variable, ranging from hardly perceptible to animal death. Generally speaking, animal death is not common since only a few species of plants possess deadly toxins. But just because you have never lost animals as a result of plant poisoning does not mean they have not been exposed to poisonous plants.

2. *Poisonous plants in hay are safe.* Most plant toxins are very stable compounds that do not break down during the curing process, thus retaining their toxic properties. Of course not all weeds are toxic, but if weedy hay is being fed it is important to know what weeds are present and the risk associated with these species.

3. *Only young animals are at risk.* Yes, young animals are generally more likely to eat poisonous plants out of sheer curiosity. However, if desirable forage becomes scarce, even mature animals will begin to browse on poisonous plants.

4. *Poisonous plants occur naturally and there is little I can do about it.* Yes, there are a number of poisonous plants that occur naturally in a pasture, but it has been my experience that most

poisonous plants are actually planted by land owners. Red maple, cherry, lantana, azaleas, and oleander are all landscape plants that can be harmful to animals. It is important to ensure that these species are not planted within reach of the animals.

Symptoms and Procedure

As stated previously, most plant toxins are designed to deter grazing and function by making the animal sick rather than resulting in instant death. The most common symptoms of poisonous plants exposure is general sickness, loss of appetite, off-color urine, weight loss, standing alone, excessive water intake and shaggy coat. If these symptoms are observed, it is important to call your local county extension agent and veterinarian. The extension agent can perform an inventory of what plants are present and hopefully find which species has been ingested. This information can help narrow down which toxin is responsible for the sickness and allow the veterinarian to develop an appropriate treatment plan.

Most common Poisonous plants

Red Maple and Cherry

Cherry trees are highly toxic to all animals. Cherry is very common around pastures since seeds from these trees are readily consumed by birds and deposited along fencerows. Cherry trees produce cyanide in the leaves and limited exposure can lead to animal death. Red maple is less toxic, but causes a blood disorder that can leave the animal sick for an extended period of time. Both cherry and maple are much more toxic if animals consume wilted leaves. These trees should be removed from the pasture to prevent browsing. If trees are not removed, it is of critical importance to scout the pasture after each storm event and remove any limbs that

have fallen to the ground so the animals will not eat the wilted leaves.

Crotalaria or Rattlebox

The whole plant is toxic, especially the seed. Since the seed is the most toxic portion, poisoning from the plant is most common in the fall after prolific seeding has occurred. The toxin in the plant causes liver damage, which can be irreversible. Generally speaking, animals become sick after ingesting this plant, but may not die for months afterward as the disease progresses.

Coffeeweed

Like crotalaria, all parts of these plants are toxic, but seeds are most toxic. These plants have an off-flavor and are generally avoided by animals. However, coffeeweed is relatively frost tolerant and will remain green after the first light frost has caused bahiagrass or bermudagrass to become dormant. Most coffeeweed poisoning occurs at this time since it is one of the few plants that remain green in the pasture. Mowing these plants near, or immediately after, frost is an effective management plan.

Bracken fern

This plant is commonly found in densely shaded areas directly under trees, or in areas recently cleared of trees. It does not produce seed, and all parts are toxic with roots being the most toxic. Bracken fern is generally eaten in the summer when the animals retreat into the woods for shade. Like most toxic plants, bracken fern is only eaten because desirable forage is not available in the heavily shaded environment.

Perilla mint

Two factors make this plant easy to identify;

1. Square stem
2. Mint-like odor

Perilla mint grows best in partial shade – along forest borders or around farm buildings. All parts of this plant are toxic, but flowers are most toxic. Adverse effects from animal exposure are most common in the fall when flowers are present.

Poisonous plants can be problematic, but are not insurmountable. By knowing which species to watch for, and when to be vigilant, poisonous plants will become just another weed in your overall management portfolio.