

Common Arkansas Plants Poisonous to Cattle

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Livestock are accidentally poisoned in Arkansas each year from eating toxic plants in hay and pasture forage crops.

What is a poisonous plant? It is one that causes such problems as animal sickness, skin irritation, loss of appetite, loss of weight, reduced milk production or death.

All poisonous plants do not contain the same toxin. There are at least six different classes of poisons within plants. The two largest groups are alkaloids and glycosides. Within each of the six classes are several different poisonous compounds.

Twenty-three weeds are listed in this publication. They are among the 45 most common poisonous plants in Arkansas. However, their presence on a farm does not mean that animals will be killed or even show ill effects. The reasons are that (1) animals may not eat them, (2) the plants may not contain toxic levels of the poison at the time they are eaten, (3) animals eating the plants may be immune to the poisons they contain, (4) animals may not eat the poisonous part of the plant or (5) farmers may have rendered plants nontoxic by making hay or silage of them, by diluting the material eaten with other forage or by feeding certain materials to counteract the poison.

Some plants are likely to be a greater hazard to animal health than others because they (1) are so abundant in an area, (2) contain a more deadly poison or (3) because animals seek them out for selective grazing.

Livestock losses due to poisonous plants may be reduced or eliminated by weed control, by grazing practices, by keeping tame forage stands healthy and thick, by using caution during drought periods and by diluting contaminated feed with forage known to be free of poisonous materials.

Severity of Poisoning

Some of the factors that influence the degree of hazard associated with poisonous plants are as follows:

Plant Species – All plants absorb nitrates, but plants such as the sorghums, small grains, corn, turnips, rape, kochia, orchardgrass, pigweed, lambsquarter and soybeans are more likely than other plants to accumulate nitrates in toxic levels.

Plant Parts – The entire plant (as in the case of johnsongrass) or only certain parts of plants (as in the case of acorns and buds of oak trees) may accumulate poisons to a lethal level.

Environment – Reduced light caused by shade or cloudy weather can encourage nitrate accumulation in plants; droughts may also encourage nitrate accumulation; and frost or freezing weather may release deadly levels of prussic acid from johnsongrass.

Plant Age – Poisons that occur in plants such as white snakeroot and johnsongrass are more likely to be hazardous in younger plants.

Form of Feed – Johnsongrass hay is likely to be a safer form of feed than johnsongrass pasture since prussic acid dissipates from hay.

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23 “Weeds” Most Likely to Poison Livestock in Arkansas

| Plant | Toxic Part of Plant | Animals Affected If Known | Symptoms | Type Poison | | Notes and Treatment* |
|---|---|------------------------------------|--|--------------------------|--|--|
| | | | | Category | Specific | |
| Occasionally Hazardous | | | | | | |
| Johnsongrass | All plant parts. Particularly green stunted plants, frosted plants and second growth. | Cattle, sheep, goats, horses | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Slow pulse 2. Dilated pupils 3. Labored breathing 4. Exhaled air has almond smell 5. Down cattle rarely recover | Glycoside | Prussic acid Nitrates | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prussic acid poisoning is not likely with hay. 2. Nitrate content is ranked from highest to lowest concentrations in plant parts as follows: roots, stems, leaves, seed. |
| Perilla Mint 1. Square-stemmed annual 2. Oval, serrated, green and purple leaves 3. Distinct odor 4. Problems most likely in late summer | | Cattle and horses most frequently | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cattle develop emphysema of lungs 2. Open mouth breathing 3. Tire easily 4. Grunt when exhaling | Perilla Ketone | | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Grows in shade. 2. Often seen around the edge of pastures. 3. Remains green in dry periods. 4. Can remain toxic in hay. |
| Oak Primarily white oak along streams | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Acorns 2. Young buds | Cattle, horses, sheep, goats | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Frequent urination 2. Dry muzzle 3. Constipation 4. Thirst 5. Rough hair coat | Toxic acid Pyrogallol | | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does kidney damage 2. Can be eaten by most cattle without ill effect. 3. Feed 3 pounds of a feed mix daily/head that consists of 10% slake lime (CaOH). |
| Wild Cherry or Black Cherry Tree | Wilted leaves | Cattle, sheep, goats | | Glycoside | Prussic acid | Poisoning is mainly from consumption of wilted leaves after tree is cut or damaged by storm. |
| Hazardous in a Few Cases | | | | | | |
| Redroot Pigweed Problems most likely after spraying with herbicide or using heavy fertility | | Cattle, sheep, ruminants | | | Nitrate | Treat with 2% methylene blue intravenously. |
| Larkspur (several species) Hazardous dose: 0.7% of body weight | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Young leaves most 2. Entire plant | Cattle, horses, rabbits | 1. Paralysis | Alkaloids | Ajacine Delphinine Delphirine Delphinoidine | Sheep graze it without harm. |
| Coffee Senna Problems most likely in fall | Green or dry leaves, stem, seed | Cattle and others; often yearlings | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cattle alert, but can't stand 2. Coffee-colored urine 3. Diarrhea | | | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Plants produce large, flat sickle-pods. 2. 8+ leaflets/leaf. |
| Sicklepod Problems most likely in fall | Green or dry leaves, stem, seed | Cattle and others; often yearlings | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cattle alert, but can't stand 2. Coffee-colored urine 3. Diarrhea | | | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mildly toxic. 2. Long, slender pods. 3. 4-6 leaflets/leaf. |

*See a veterinarian for specific treatments.

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|---|---|--|--|---|---|--|
| | | | | Category | Specific | |
| Occasionally Hazardous | | | | | | |
| Sesbania Problems most likely in fall and winter | Seeds are the most toxic plant parts. | Livestock | 1. Walk stiffly 2. Diarrhea 3. Hemorrhaging | | Saponin | 1. Cattle may crave seed. |
| Woody Nightshade 1. Perennial 2. Shiny red ripe berries occurring in clusters 3. Purple flower; orange center 4. Hazardous dose: 10 berries | 1. Ripe berries most 2. All parts | | | Alkaloids | Atropine Hydrogen cyanide | Death is rare in animals. |
| Deadly Nightshade 1. A perennial 2. 3-4 berries can kill a child | All parts | Horses, cattle, goats, ducks, chickens | | Alkaloids | Atropine Hyoscyamine | Death is rare in animals. |
| Ground Cherry | Unripe fruit and leaves | | | | | |
| Potentially Hazardous | | | | | | |
| Water Hemlock 1. Perennial 2. Hollow, mottled stem 3. Lance-shaped leaves 4. Chambered lower-most stems 5. Tubers 6. Problems most likely in spring | 1. Roots 2. All parts | Cattle more likely; horses, cattle, swine, sheep, goats, man | 1. Paralysis of horse's hind legs 2. Frothing of mouth 3. Dilated pupils 4. Nervous 5. Trembling | Volatile alkaloids Volatile oil Resin | Aenanine Oenanthotoxin Terpine Cicutoxin | 1. Lose toxin with age. 2. The most violent poisonous plant in the United States. |
| Poison Hemlock 1. Hollow stems 2. Leaves are carrot-like 3. Herbage smells mousy 4. Hazardous dose: 10-14 oz/cow 5. Problems most likely in spring | 1. Roots and seeds 2. Entire plant | Livestock, poultry, man | 1. Vomiting 2. Trembling 3. Dilated pupils | Alkaloids | Conine | Used by Greeks as a poison. |
| Black Locust | Inner bark, seed, flowers, leaves | Horses, cattle, sheep, poultry, humans | 1. Purgative 2. Stupor 3. Perspiration | Glycoside Phytotoxin | Robinin | |
| Pokeweed Problems in spring, summer, fall | 1. Roots are the most poisonous part 2. Entire plant | Cattle, horses, swine, man | 1. Irritated skin 2. Vomiting 3. Diarrhea | Acrid alkaloid Oxalic acid | Phylolaccioxin Phylolaccin Phylolaccic acid | Phylolaccioxin is a saponin. |
| Jimsonweed Hazardous doses: • Man - 20 seeds • Horses - 5-8 oz. • Cattle - 6-12 oz. • Sheep - 3-8 oz. | 1. Seeds are the most toxic part 2. Entire plant | Cattle, horses, swine, poultry, man, dogs | 1. Pupils dilate 2. Thirst 3. Dry, burning skin | Alkaloids Alcohol | Atropin Hyoscine Scopolamine Tremetol | Green or dry plants are hazardous. |
| Bracken Fern 1. A perennial 2. Problems most likely in summer 3. Poison is cumulative 4. Hazardous dose is when cattle consume their weight of bracken fern in 1 to 4 months | All stages of plant growth | Cattle, horses, sheep; goats are insensitive | 1. Bloody stool 2. Excessive bleeding from fly bites 3. Convulsions 4. Death | Enzyme | Triaminase | 1. Hay can cause problems. 2. Vitamin B1 is inactivated. 3. Depression of bone marrow. |

*See a veterinarian for specific treatments.

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|---|---|--|---|-------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| | | | | Category | Specific | |
| Potentially Hazardous (continued) | | | | | | |
| White Snakeroot | Leaves, stems, green flower-heads | Cattle, sheep, horses, man, domestic animals | 1. Trembling 2. Slobbering 3. Vomiting | Alcohol Glycoside | Tremetol | 1. Dry plants are slightly toxic. 2. Poison is cumulative. |
| Buttercup Problems most likely at flowering time | Stems, leaves | All animals | 1. Death 2. Ulcerated skin 3. Red milk 4. Bitter milk | Irritant oil | Protoaemonin | 1. Prickly sensation in mouth. 2. Harmless when dried. 3. Certain plant species are more hazardous. |
| Equisetum (scouring rush) | Tops | 1. Cattle and sheep on pasture 2. Horses on hay | | Enzyme Alkaloid | Thiaminase | 1. Vitamin B1 is inactivated. 2. Treat with massive thiamine dose. |
| Hemp Dogbane 1. 15-30 grams can kill a cow or horse | Green or dry leaves and tops | Cattle, horses, sheep | 1. Increased temperature 2. Sweating but cold extremities 3. Dilation of pupils 4. Discoloration of mouth and nostrils 5. Refusal to eat or drink | Resin Glycoside | Apocynin Apocynin Cymarin | 1. Treat with tannic acid followed by emptying stomach. 2. Can remain toxic in hay. |
| Ergot 1. Mainly in dallisgrass and tall fescue 2. Cattle deaths reported in extreme cases in dallisgrass | Hard fungal bodies found in mature seed-heads | Cattle, horses, sheep | 1. Trembling 2. Incoordination 3. Lameness 4. Loss of tail or hoof 5. Convulsions 6. Delirious or excitable | Alkaloid | Ergotamine | 1. Found only in seedheads. 2. More serious. when cattle graze heavily infested fields when seedheads are present. 3. Clipping seed-heads reduces problem. |

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Fortunately, most (but not all) poisonous plants must be consumed in large quantities to be lethal. Also, many have an undesirable taste, and animals do not consume them in toxic levels unless they are forced to do so by a shortage of forage that occurs during drought or long winter seasons.

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