



News Column

University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension

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POISONOUS PLANTS IN PASTURES

I walked a pasture for a client the other day looking at the possibility of a poisonous plant causing the death. Despite finding twelve poisonous species in the pasture, testing of the animal identified a different cause. While most pastures contain a number of poisonous species, it is very unusual to have the animals eat the poisonous plants. Cases that I remember in my Extension career here include jimson weed and wood anemone. By far the most common poisonous plant killing cattle, horses and other grazing animals is a common landscape plant. Yews planted around the house get trimmed and or removed and are disposed of in the pasture. Horses and cattle will eat the leaves and they will die. I trim mine and hang the trimming along the property boundary hoping for deer...no luck so far!!

The spring rains made this a good year for poison hemlock. This is a toxic plant which grows in damp areas in pastures and waste areas. Ingestion of small amounts of poison hemlock can make humans sick as well as livestock, thus proper management is necessary. In long ago days before computer games, summer sports camps and air conditioning, kids made whistles out of hollow stemmed plants. When poison hemlock or black elderberry stems were used to make the whistles, mild to severe poisoning was sometimes the result. While cattle poisoning is possible it is rare because the cattle would likely only eat the plant when no other possibility including a weak fence was present.

Poison hemlock is a taprooted, biennial broadleaf plant. The most distinguishing characteristic is the purple to red spots or blotches on the hollow, green stems. The leaves are finely divided, hairless, and may have a glossy green color. The lacy appearance of the hemlock leaves can be confused with edible parsley when plants are young. In its second year of growth it will bolt and produce a stalk. The flowers are small, white, and arranged in relatively large umbrella-like clusters. When mature, plants can reach 10 feet in height. Poison Hemlock thrives in moist soils and is common in pastures, ditchbanks and roadsides. The poisonous alkaloids are present in all plant parts, although, leaves, flowers and seeds tend to have the highest concentrations.

Poison hemlock spreads via seed, so effective management must prevent new seed production, limit the spread of existing seed, and exhaust the existing seed bank in the soil. The most effective control may be mowing to prevent seed production, followed with herbicide applications to rosettes and resprouts. Seeds remain viable in the soil for up to three years and can germinate from late summer to early spring when the moisture and temperature conditions are suitable. A mixture of 2,4-D + dicamba or Grazon P&D can effectively control poison hemlock when applied in the fall or early spring. The first year basal rosettes may be sprayed from midsummer through fall and second-year plants begin bolting flower stalks in April and begin flowering in mid-May. I thank my fellow Extension Educator in Lancaster County Tyler Williams for his work on parts of this column.

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