

Ask A Vet: Ornamental Shrubs Highly Toxic to Cattle and Horses

Sunday, April 17, 2016

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

We trimmed our Japanese yew shrubs around our house recently and my neighbor warned us not to allow our cattle or horses access to them. Are they a problem to livestock?

Dear Reader,

This widely used ornamental shrub is deadly to all species of livestock and pets. Over the years I have been called to treat cattle and horses that have ingested small amounts of yew trimmings and sadly many of those animals don't survive long enough to even receive treatment. The highly toxic taxine alkaloids that are the toxic principle cause a rapid succession of clinical signs, difficult breathing, trembling, incoordination, and collapse. This is often followed by rapid death from cardiac failure and often it is only few minutes from beginning to end. As little as six to eight ounces of yew trimmings can kill an adult horse or cow.

Most exposures occur when trimmings from hedges or shrubs are thrown into pastures but sometimes animals gain access to yew plants when they escape into landscaped areas. For this reason I am not a fan of using these evergreen plants for landscaping that is anywhere near where cattle and horses are raised. The Japanese and English yews grow throughout North America and are widely used as ornamentals. Another yew, the Ground Hemlock, is native to North America and grows from the Midwest to the northeastern states in woods and forests.

There is no specific treatment for yew poisoning so prevention from exposure is so very important. Atropine and lidocaine are sometimes successful in controlling the cardiac arrhythmias and oral activated charcoal is used as a detoxification measure. Veterinarians are called to perform post mortem exams on animals and sometimes find the undigested yew trimmings in the stomach contents. Tiny amounts of the taxine alkaloid can be detected from stomach contents in cases where clinical signs and post mortem findings are not conclusive.

Thank your neighbor for the heads up and please be careful with those yew trimmings!

-Dr. Jerry Sellon