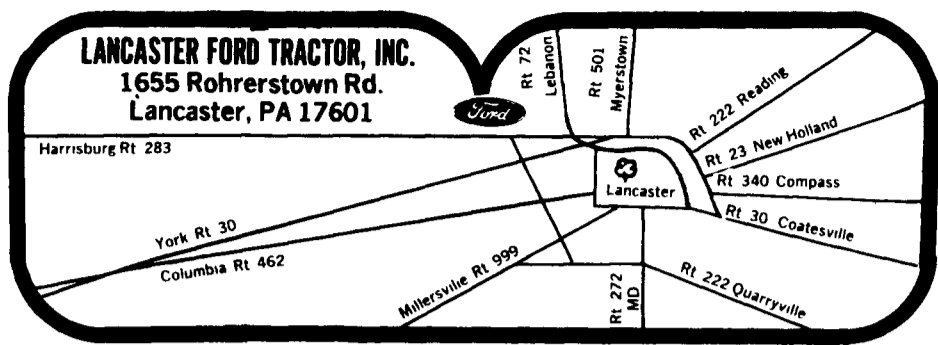


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Brockett's Ag Advice

By John E. Brockett
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Avoiding pasture problems

Last week I discussed the importance of observing heifers on pasture. One of the illustrations I used was of the farmer who found dead heifers long after they had died. This brings up a big potential problem area of pasturing--poisonous plants.

There are a lot of plants that can and do poison animals every year. However, we can usually narrow the problems down to a few plants.

One of the major culprits is Water Hemlock. It is very prevalent in wet areas such as spring seeps, lazy little brooks, swampy areas, marshes, sponge holes, etc.

Water Hemlock can cause poisoning in more than one way. Of course, the most likely is that the animals eat it, either because it is green or along with something else.

Many farmers feel that just because they have good pasture the animals will leave plants alone. This may be true, but there is another way that the animals could get poisoned from water hemlock. That is by walking on the roots and stems causing them to "bleed" into the water. If the water is stagnant or nearly so, there could be a rather high concentration of poison buildup in the pool. Then if the animals drink from it, they've had it.

Usually if they have other sources of fresh water they will use it rather than the stagnant pool, but cows being cows there is no guarantee of that.

Wild cherry is probably suspected more often than is true, but it can be a deadly poison when the leaves are wilting. What usually happens is that the first animals that come upon the cherries whip up their tongue and grab a few mouthfuls of fresh leaves and often fruit. They like it so take another bite or two, then tire of eating woody material and move on.

Then the second group of heifers come along and see where the others have been eating. Have you ever noticed that heifers like to nose in where other heifers have been? They too partake of the goodies.

Unfortunately this bunch also

gets the broken branches from the first group. Guess what is with those broken branches? That is right, there are a bunch of wilting leaves--and danger.

Other ways the broken branches and wilting leaves can happen is via wind or rain storm, clipping the pasture--including small wild cherries, rubbing to get rid of flies or other pests, a piece of equipment breaking off a branch or branches, and someone chopping the trees down then not removing all of the branches.

Those two are probably the most common pasture poisoning causes. However there are others such as giant buttercup, wilted locust leaves, and ferns. Most of the other poisonous plants are most apt to be eaten by animals on poor pasture and no supplemental feed.

There have been a number of cases where animals were never actually poisoned by poisonous plants but really suffered from an age old disease of heifers confined to pasture--Hollow Belly. To guard against pasture problems, feed supplemental feed on pasture whether it is to heifers or cows, keep them out of wet or swampy areas, walk over your pastures to find the potential danger areas, try to eradicate water hemlock, trim or remove wild cherries, do not graze right after clipping a pasture (unless you are sure there are no locust or cherry trees that would be cut when clipping), and supply a fresh source of water.

Sudan grass makes a good temporary pasture. We used it when we had heifers on our farm. They actually got fat on it. However there is one potential danger to Sudan Grass--it can be poisonous. When the grass is too young, or stunted due to drought, or has been frosted, it can build up prussic acid which can kill an animal that eats it. The danger is worst when the animals have had little or nothing to eat prior to eating the problem grass.

As I said last week, pasture can be a cheap way to produce replacement animals, but it is not problem free. As a manager you are responsible for those critters under your care--accept that and act accordingly.

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