

Poisonous Plants
ALTERNATIVE VETERINARY MEDICINE CENTRE
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POISONOUS & UNFRIENDLY PLANTS

Everyone knows that Ragwort is extremely dangerous, to those few horses that will eat it. It may not be so well-known that, should the plant be damaged and wilted, horses may be attracted to it. Haymaking that accidentally incorporates Ragwort is very dangerous because of this palatability-enhancing effect, inherent in the haymaking process. It may also not be well-known that Ragwort is a biennial plant and that the first-year phase is a low, rosette-like plant (rather than the tall, second-year flowering phase), close to the ground and not easy to see, except on bare ground. Ragwort plants must be uprooted and destroyed. Even accidental breaking or crushing of ragwort in a field, by tractor wheel or horse hoof, can be dangerous as the damaged plant wilts and becomes palatable.

Horses will generally avoid eating poisonous plants but, should grass 'burn off' in the summer, or should horses be in an over-crowded, over-grazed field, then they may develop a desire to forage in the hedgerows and to eat what they would normally shun. Poisonings can then occur.

More poisonous or undesirable plants are known, than the examples listed below. Basic knowledge of plants and their recognition is therefore important. The AVMC is happy to advise on this important aspect of grazing management, if required.

While horses and other herbivores are obviously in a situation where they may be exposed to poisonous plants and may perversely wish to eat them, it is not unknown for other species (e.g. dogs and cats) to ingest poisonous plants and to suffer ill effects. Many house plants, for instance, are capable of causing digestive upsets, colic or more serious poisonings. The flowers and shrubs that we keep in our gardens may also be hazardous. Despite the widespread distribution of toxic plants in the domestic environment, it has to be said that poisonings are, happily,

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very rare. The signs and symptoms suffered by a German Shepherd Dog having eaten Bryony were once reported in detail in the '*Veterinary Record*'. The **AVMC** has treated several puppies that have mischievously or playfully eaten daffodils and other house plants. The Labrador pup that ate the daffodils became uncoordinated and fell down the stairs. He luckily survived both challenges.

Poisonous Plants (some examples, including trees and fungi):

Aconite (Monkshood)	Horsetails
Black Bryony	Jack-in-the-Pulpit
Bracken	Laburnum
Deadly Nightshade	Laurel
Death Cap	Lily of the Valley
Dog's Mercury	Linseed (uncooked)
Dropworts (various)	Meadow Saffron
Ergot, in rye grass etc.	Mezereon
Flax (see Linseed)	Privet
Fly Agaric	Ragwort
Foxglove	Rhododendron
Hellebore	St John's Wort
Hemlock	White Bryony
Henbane	Yew (tree)

Unfriendly Plants & Herbage (some examples):

Buttercups
Clematis
Clover (esp. White and if in excess)
Elderflower
Grass clippings
Haylage
Oak (acorns)
Rape
Sugar Beet
Woody Nightshade

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Grass, when artificially fertilised, can be a hazard for horses. **Oven-dried grass**, Silage or Haylage are not good for digestion. Grass clippings can be a real danger.

Yew: One particular hazard that may unwittingly cause tragedy is the provision of grass clippings incidentally or accidentally containing yew clippings, from ornamental trees. People operating lawn mowers do not always realise the lethal significance of such things for horses.

Nettles, when sprayed and at the wilting stage, even if so-called 'livestock-friendly' herbicides have been used, can cause serious [laminitis](#) or worse. By way of contrast, unsprayed, wilted nettles are a wonderful food for horses.

Clients of **AVMC** are given deeper advice on this vital topic, with explanations, on request.

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