

Cattle and Ivy

Extracts from Nibblers online discussion group

We have recently sold some cattle to someone who has asked if eating ivy is likely to cause them any problems. We don't have any experience on this. Does anyone else know if ivy is safe?

Second request - is anyone using a high pressure washer powered by a generator for cleaning out your livestock trailer? I would be grateful to receive details of any you have found up to the job.

Thanks.

Mike Sandison
Essex Wildlife Trust

We have our fair share of ivy and have never poisoned anything to our knowledge. Sheep seem to like it as well and they are probably more sensitive than cattle to such problems. They were used on Gruniard to test bio weapons such as anthrax, so I guess the boffins think they are good indicators.

One year we had a huge lot of acorns and that may have killed a cow. My guess is that it is okay if they get a bit and then some more, but putting them into a field with sudden access to lots of ivy is the most detrimental management. I cannot imagine why they do not use sheep to clear mine fields but I suppose it is bad PR spin.

If you have a PTO why not use that for your pressure washer and miss out on the generator.
Richard M

My Shetland cattle always strip reachable ivy very quickly on any reserve they are put on. It is considered poisonous in large quantities, as always this is never quantified and therefore this information is rather useless, though information on uses in herbalism indicates quantities for treatment. I am assuming that incidences of poisoning come after a large helping has been offered without free access to alternatives, as my cattle have never exhibited any signs of illness on sites with ivy and I am think they must self regulate. It is used in herbalism as a mild purgative and emetic. The berries are used for treatment of all fevers, loss of appetite, dropsy, constipation. Two tablespoon daily is consider a dose. poultices of leaves are used for inflamed joints, enlarged glands, chilblains. It is considered one of the best herbs for retained afterbirth, one large handful fed direct after lambing for sheep, more for cows.

Mary Holloway

Mike

We haven't much Ivy in the first place so can't help you there.

As for pressure washers - have you already bought one that you want to run on a genny? If so then you want a high output genny as the washer will require a sudden surge of power as you press the trigger to start washing. I presume you have access to a reasonable pressure of water. Most washers require water at 2-3bar.

If you haven't bought one then as Richard says you could go for a P.T.O. driven one which will suck water from a barrel or the likes of Clarke [and others] do petrol/diesel driven power washers that will also pump water from a barrel / pond / river.

Andrew Storey
Head Warden - Hindhead Commons

Mike, Richard et al

About 30 years ago I was pollarding some willows which were clad in ivy. As soon as the poles were on the the ground bullocks stripped the ivy. I was a little concerned so asked the farmer who said they could eat as much as they liked. At the time he had been farming for over 60 years and his feelings were that cattle use ivy as some sort of 'medicine'. I've never stopped livestock eating ivy since; in fact, I often break off pieces to give to cattle, sheep and goats. They all love it.

I often have ivy-covered, spindly birches fall over in a wood that's grazed by sheep and as soon as the sheep see one of these fallen trees they make straight for the ivy. I've spoken to the grazier and she is perfectly happy about this extra food; she also has been farming for 50+ years so must know a thing or two.

I've also watched roe deer nibble both the leaves and bark of ivy and assume they know what's good for them.

Peter Chapman
The Vincent Wildlife Trust

mike

used to specifically feed ivy to sheep off their feed to get their appetite going again - worked well

regards jim

Mares eat oats and does eat oats and little lambs eat ivy.

For some reason my Grandmother used to recite that. She was as daft as a brush in many ways, but there was probably some truth in it.

Henry

Our cattle love ivy, and have often eaten quite a lot in one go without harm.

I too have heard it's supposed to be poisonous, but our animals seem able to cope and we regard it as good winter forage, like Gaultheria. Mind you, they eat cherry laurel freely too...

I'd not worry unless they had nothing else at all to eat.

Our cattle show the classic herbivore behaviour of testing new plants. For the first few days they'll just nibble, sniff and lick, then if they feel OK they'll eat it properly.

This works well with most things, but not with cumulative toxins, such as acorns -- in fact with them it can be counterproductive. We had three go down with acorns last winter. One died straightaway, and the two survivors were put on good grass. They tucked in enthusiastically, but after a day refused to eat it -- then did the same thing in turn with silage, good hay and concentrate, though they would eat a little very dry, old and tasteless hay. I think they attributed their crook feelings to the new food, not to the acorns they'd been eating (they can eat acorns for weeks or months, but sometimes it catches up with them). Basically

they starved, while their gut linings dissolved from the tannin irritation. Eventually a second one died. However, we put a healthy animal with the last sick one for company, and this brought her round. The other beast ate the grass avidly, and the sick one spent a couple of days following him round, sniffing and licking what he'd eaten. Eventually she decided as he had not died it must be OK, and she ate it too and made a complete recovery. (Rat poison works on the same principle -- the ratties all feel fine until they die).

Not sure if all cattle do this testing though... I heard about a herd last summer where a number of Angus crosses died from eating (green) ragwort, while other cattle left it alone as usual.

Richard C

According to the old MAFF handbook 'Poisonous Plants in Britain and their effects on Animals and Man' (Cooper, M R & Johnson, A W; 1984), ivy, in small quantities "is not considered harmful to livestock and is said by some to be beneficial."

However, it goes on to say that... "Ivy poisoning has been reported in cattle, deer, sheep and dogs with symptoms including vomiting, diarrhoea, excitement, muscular spasms, paralysis and initial dilation and later contraction of blood vessels. After consuming large quantities of leaves and berries, when pasture was scarce, two dairy cows started to stagger, became excitable and occasionally bellowed loudly as if in pain. A strong odour of crushed ivy leaves, both in the breath and in the milk, persisted for about three days, after which recovery was complete and uneventful. Another report states that ivy seeds were responsible for the death of poultry in France."

For the biochemists and toxicologists among you, apparently ivy contains saponins (hederasaponins A and B) which undergo partial hydrolysis, with loss of sugars, to form the toxic substances α and β hederin. So now you know!

Regards,

Chris Britt
ADAS

Author wrote:

- > Re ragwort poisoning in cattle. Is it culmulative as it is in equines i.e.
- > gradually damages the liver? I wonder if the other cattle were eating it
- > also but hadn't reached a liver crisis? Interesting that they ate it
- > green, as it is supposed to taste vile. Perhaps they have different
- > preferences. Ponies avoid it at all costs unless it is wilted or dead and
- > then may nibble it. As pointed out earlier, the amounts plus the other
- > herbage must be important. Ponies also take ivy in small amounts.

Not sure taste to us is much guide -- they seem to eat all sorts of apparently vile things, and not eat other apparently bland ones. For example they'll eat the leaves of larger pine trees, but not those of seedlings -- they taste very similar to me (vile, even for lovers of the roughest retsina...).

Novice cattle do sometimes nibble a little ragwort, but then they leave it alone, so I think it is a learnt response for them (and I guess for horses too). The toxic effects are similar in cattle, (and indeed people) as in horses. All sources I've read say that all Senecios are toxic, but one year our cattle ate a lot of heath groundsel (*Senecio sylvaticum*) without apparent harm. Perhaps they didn't eat enough?

Our cattle readily eat hemlock (Conium) as well as water hemlock (Oenanthe crocata) without harm. However, the latter can poison cattle, as they learn to eat the not-too-toxic leaves safely, but then if they find the starchy and much more toxic roots they eat those too. We don't worry where it is growing in flat ground, but we check along the water's edge and pull out any exposed roots -- they're like bunches of white carrots. It does not persist too well under consistent cattle grazing.

Conium is supposed to be teratogenic -- causing birth defects. Our one potentially affected calf was OK -- but eventually she was one of those who died of acorns.

Richard C

What we heard in Jersey is that Jersey cattle are very susceptible to hemlock water dropwort poisoning. We have met farmers who have lost young stock in particular to it. I do not know the details of when the animals were introduced eg newly put into a field, or normally in the field, or whether cows learn or not to avoid it. I know it is a major problem getting effective cattle grazing (there are principally only Jersey cows in Jersey) trying to restore abandoned wet meadows where the water dropwort can become very abundant.

Kind regards,
Penny

I have heard of an example where cattle had access over a long period to ditch banks where hemlock water dropwort grew. The cattle suffered no apparent harm until the ditches were cleaned and the plants were uprooted. The cattle ate the roots and several died. The message I got from this was that the tops are no problem but the roots are. But it could be that types and breeds of livestock differ in their susceptibility to the aerial parts of the plant.

Dr F.W. Kirkham

Cathy and all

As has been mentioned, goats eat ivy. I have seen them eat it in some quantity, though not preferentially (latter concluded from domestic goats studied in Cheddar Gorge) and in free-ranging conditions haven't seen any ill effects.

And aren't we leaving the poor old burros out?

The Donkey sanctuary website says - 'If large quantities of leaves and berries are eaten it can become serious' but I'm sure our discussion applies to them also.... but if in doubt, give 'em oats?

Jude (-:
