

## **Cattle grazing in Yew and Juniper Extracts from Nibblers online discussion group**

The Trust have a downland Yew / Juniper / site in south Wilts which needs cattle to graze. We have a grazier, but he would prefer to get hold of some stock with experience of grazing amongst extensive stands of Yew and Juniper. Any offers or thoughts, please forward / cc to Jake Hancock, Wessex Region Farm and Countryside Advisor.

David Hodd  
Countryside Manager, Purbeck Estate

---

Yew leaves are toxic to cattle and the berries are even more so !  
Richard M

---

Not answering your query but adding another one I'm afraid!

I'm surprised you have someone willing to graze the site. We have a neighbour next to one of our woodland reserves who has a big issue with some of our boundary trees which are yews. He's concerned that they are going to kill his cattle and has suggested the Trust 'makes sure it's insurance is up-to-date'! So on a slightly different tangent anyone know the legal issues surrounding boundary trees and what our obligations are to our neighbour with grazing animals?

Thanks, Helen  
Helen Gee

---

helen

suppose technically any overhanging branches should be lopped (and he can do so), but probably politic to ensure yew is out of reach of his animals?

Ask local NFU office...put NFU in to google and you will be able to find your local (regional) contacts; they run insurance services (for members?)

regards

jim swanson

---

I once grazed a site with Shetland cattle where the owners believed they had removed all lower branches of the Yews present. I eventually came across one that had been missed and had been browsed to quite a degree, though not knowing what had been present to begin with I can't say how much had been ingested. I can only say that the advice I had been given, that one mouthful can kill, was clearly not correct in this case. It would be interesting to try to discover why and one would have to put cattle onto areas with access to greater amounts, and watch feeding patterns closely. One would have to know the legal position if accused of deliberately experimenting with feeding poisonous material and causing suffering or harm.

Mary Holloway

---

Two of the SSSIs I deal with have cattle grazing limestone grassland with numerous yew trees and other sites have cattle grazing and scattered yews. The cattle browse the yews and do not die.

The danger of yew is regularly raised by farmers as a concern. No doubt inexperienced

animals do sometimes poison themselves but it is definitely possible for cattle and yew (and other poisonous plants such as ragwort and water dropwort) to co-exist.

Jacqueline Ogden  
Conservation Officer  
Cumbria Team

---

About 50 years ago when we took this farm back in hand we use lots of home grown yew to make gate posts. Most have rotted away but one or two are still in good nick. I was subsequently told that it depended on when they were felled, but was not told when the right time to do it was. Maybe that suggests that yew's toxicity varies with the season leading to confusion with some people suffering losses and others claiming, as an old bat near here, that yew is not toxic.

Maybe you could get some academic to test yews throughout the year, and you then graze them when they are not toxic if that is required.

The reason that yews occur in churchyards as that was one of the few places not grazed, so toxicity must be of concern.

Common sense would suggest that the rising spring sap would be the toxic component but never ever let common sense come into your scheme of things as that is a quick route to going bust these days.

If you have been warned that your yew is a danger then when you claim the insurance Co will repudiate the claim as you should act as if you were not insured. Their profit is the money saved by repudiating claims +/- a million here or there.

Richard

---

i think susceptibility may vary between individuals.

Barton hills used to be sheep grazed and there are a couple of yews there. the sheep took some yew and the lower branches were nibbled with no obvious ill affect on the woolies. however we eventually had a few cattle about as well and one died close to the yews, and apparently had eaten "some" on autopsy. the others seemed unaffected. yew on the boundary is tricky...i guess if one got wind blown into your neighbours field then this could be serious .

graham

---

I thought that by now we had succeeded in convincing the world at large, or at least the part of it that concerns itself with conservation grazing, that cattle can live in peace and harmony with yew provided that they have other things available to eat.

Every generation of calves I breed or buy in (something in excess of 2- or 300 animals in all over the years I guess) has had to meet yew for the first time and all have managed to come to terms with it on this basis without mishap. Which sounds like bravado I know but there it is.

My understanding with boundary trees is that the neighbour can lop off any branches back to the line of the boundary and throw them back for the owner of the tree to deal with. Which would probably lead to the yew poisoning stock on the owner's side. So probably best to reach an agreement before it comes to this.

Bill

---

This is news to me but I have never lost anything to yew poisoning because I have never given it a chance ! In a good "mast" year a grazier here did lose a bullock to acorns, at least he thought so. If they get a few early ones and the some more that then that seems okay but if they are turned into a field with lots of acorns lying around then that seems to cause a problem.

Is the solution that a little followed by more is okay but if a hungry beast suddenly gets a gut full then you have a problem?

Bill's definition about boundaries sounds right to me, but I am not a lawyer.

---

This has probably been mentioned before, but it seems a possibility that knowledge to avoid yew (and other toxic plants) could be passed from mother to calf. In other words intensive dairy cattle used to sterile rye-grass pasture suddenly put in a location with yew dotted around may well eat it excessively, but those that learn what to eat from a previous generation with experience are less likely to over-consume the toxic plants.

Henry Campbell-Ricketts

---

Its great to get so many replies, but some could have the word yew replaced with ragwort or hemlock water dropwort or whatever. My experience is that where people have had a bad experience with toxic plants, the can be over cautious (or at best more cautious) about that one, and then open minded to other poisonous plants, which they don't find to be a problem. For many, poisonous plants become some sort of mythical monster, whose pariah status is exaggerated by anecdotal stories.

I guess my colleagues in Wiltshire have found a grazier who has probably had a bad experience of say hemlock water dropwort, so is relaxed about yew; but who is rightly looking for some stock who have knowledge of yew, and are therefore less likely to browse it. I have seen perfectly healthy sheep browsing yew, preferentially with no apparent adverse effects. I won't conclude that it is therefore always safe, just as those who remember a poisoning incident can conclude that no animal should ever go near any potentially poisonous plant. There is certainly much more to be understood about the interaction of poisonout plants and stock.

I guess with stock grazing neighbouring trees, you could counter sue for damage to trees!

David Hodd  
Countryside Manager, Purbeck Estate

---

I think this is on the correct lines, I believe the variety of types of shep and cattle in the UK reflected their ability to thrive in different areas with different trace elements and most probably things like lead toxicity became tolerated. Maybe some locals became yew tolerant by just nibbling bit. New arrivals who had a gut full went down with it.

With minute traces I often wonder about the homeopathic effect working in reverse, using organo phosphates and organo chlorines.

Richard

---

Would the explanation be that an immune mother passes on immunity through her milk ?

If you buy the concept of homeopathy a little poison triggers a defence mechanism and so immunity presumably.

It seems more likely to me that all cattle eat it but only some are affected. The idea that mum says to calf "Dont eat that" is a bit too far out.

Richard

---

Perfectly correct about being entitled to prune trees back to a shared boundary.

However, the law only requires you to offer the prunings back to the neighbour. Tipping them back over the fence without the neighbour's consent is fly-tipping and a prosecutable offence.

Henry

---

I thought it was pretty much accepted that eating habits are passed to offspring in many species, and not far out in the slightest. Whether it happens specifically in cattle I have no idea, though as a concept it is mainstream.

Henry

---

Given that such a daft situation exists as I am sure Henry may well be correct, then surely the best plot is to ask your neighbour in writing to cut back his poisonous over hanging branches. Then if he does not do it you go into action with a halo - and claim on his insurance if he has poisoned your stock.

Richard

---

I think yew is often found in churchyards because it was a sacred tree from Pagan times, and formed the original Pagan religious site before the church was ever built. Christianity, as in so many other areas, incorporated the yew into its practices in order to help win over the heathens.

---

A couple of things

1. There has been a lot said about Yew and its dangers but I can just add my own experience. Jake in fact asked me at the start if we had any stock for this site, however in Feb this year we lost a decent yearling Belted Galloway steer to Yew poisoning. The youngsters were grazing a paddock with a fair amount of cover plus some hay every am when we had a brief snow fall one afternoon. I was on site next morning to find the animal dead but the others healthy. Took beast to regional VLA and diagnosed very quickly. This animal only needed to eat less than 500g to kill it(200kg beast). I had always thought this field was free from Yew but found a good sized specimen near the boundary with some branches overhanging into the field. Our stock had been grazing this field for the past 5 years with no effect. Maybe we were just unlucky but perhaps younger animals are more naïve?? Plus it depends on available feed at the time. Safe to say, that, or any other Yew tree found on our grazing sites did not last very long!

2. We are grazing a new scrubby site for us which has in one area in particular, a high density of Autumn Crocus (*Colchicum autumnale*). I have heard that this is toxic to humans and that farmers used to get rid of it on their pastures therefore I guess it is not much good for animals? The Welsh Black yearlings we had on there seem to have had a go at it but no ill-effects yet (you would have thought I had learned my lesson by now!). Any thoughts welcome?

Matt Stanway

Stockman, Cotswold Grazing Animals Project (NT,EN)