

Meadow Saffron *Colchicum autumnale* and Grazing Extracts from Nibblers online discussion group

Does anyone have any experience or info on promoting meadow saffron *Colchicum autumnale* through grazing? This query is on behalf of a grazier who has noted a good response in orchid numbers following grazing, but no apparent change in the crocus population, which he would like to increase.

Many thanks,
Sophie Lake
UK Co-ordinator
Grazing Animals Project

Sophie -

Try contacting the Llandrindod office of CCW (01597 860309). I remember that they cover several *Colchicum* meadows -- but I can't remember anything about the management. Talk to Dave or Hazel Drewett, or to Ray Woods -- and tell them hi from me!
Richard

I only know it from meadow sites in Somerset where the leaves are protected in early summer by removal of grazing.. I think they might be susceptible to physical bruising by cattle or ponies and also have a reputation for being toxic but I've not checked this.

Bill Grayson
GAP

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)

We have some autumn crocus and it has not been a problem yet and it has been there for about thirty years and probably before that as that was when we noticed it.

Its worst problem was a Conservation Group from the Forestry Commission visited the site and picked the lot!
Richard Micklethwaite

Dear all,

I have had the following query so can anyone give me advice on *Colchicum* and grazing, to pass on ? I know how to deal with the bracken.

"I have grazing rights on a upland common on the welsh borders . It has a healthy population of autumn crocus but the bracken is

encroaching badly as it has not been grazed for 5 years or more and it is in dire need of help. The local farmers seem loathe to put cattle on, horses seem to have been on recently and survived and in the past I gather there were sheep there. What is your advice on colchicum and grazing. I am being encouraged to put my stock on there and am happy to do so if it does not kill them. I was thinking of getting some hebridean sheep. Will they cope with it?" Cheers in advance.

Yours
Charles

We have had it here for years and never had any known case of poisoning, but the land has not been grazed very hard, by sheep and cattle.
I would only worry if the stock had to graze every bramble bush and bracken frond, which does not sound likely unless there is only scrub and not good grass.
I would suggest you put the stock on after it has died down so they cannot arrive and graze a gutful on arrival, then next year if they only get a nibble they may "learn" to avoid it.
The thinking here is that if stock are in a field when the acorns start to drop it seems okay but turn stock into a field with lot of acorns already on the ground, it seems you then are heading into danger.
Richard M

Hi Charles

Is this Henallt Common near Hay or another one nearby. Henallt Common used to have a good population of Colchicum and was grazed by a few ponies and occasional sheep but had huge amounts of bracken. The ponies were there all year and seemed to manage OK. If the grazier wants to put cattle out why not have grazing early in the season to avoid contact with plants - I think the leaves have usually disappeared by spring.

Cheers

Jan

Jan Sherry
Heathland Ecologist
Countryside Council for Wales

Hi,

Just a belated reply on this one as we had a similar query a few years back. I think there are a number of colchicum sites which are grazed, presumably without ill effect. Please see the nibblers thread on the archive on the GAP website. It would be interesting to know more about the timing of grazing on these sites. However, I understand that the toxin in meadow saffron/autumn crocus (colchicine) is cumulative, so beware this.

I think the leaves come up in about April/May, and then wither when the flowers appear in August - October. However I am not familiar enough with the species to know about the fruit, which I believe ripens in the spring, so must hang around over winter? The point being that all parts of the plant are toxic.

Following on from the thread on medicinal properties, the colchicine alkaloid used to be used to treat rheumatism, and is I think currently used for gout and is being investigated as an anti-cancer drug. Apparently the symptoms of colchicine poisoning resemble those of arsenic and there is no antidote. So graze with caution and definitely avoid overstocking.

Cheers, Sophie
GAP UK co-ordinator