

Toxic Plants to Goats, Sheep, and Cattle

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One of my least favorite myths in livestock management is “goats can eat anything!”. This is false. Goats will eat everything and anything, but this does not mean that they can or should. There are many plants and substances that can be toxic to ruminants. This article will focus on the ones I see most commonly affecting my patients in the CT, NY, MA Tri-State area.



Mountain Laurel and Rhododendrons - these two plants are the leading cause of toxicity in goats in my practice. Being browsers, goats like to eat leaves from trees and bushes. In early spring, or in the drought of summer, these bushy plants tend to be plentiful and very appealing to the browsing goat. Mountain laurel and rhododendron consumption will result in gastrointestinal upset, drooling, vomiting, grinding teeth, convulsions, and possible death. If you have a goat you suspect has consumed either plant, call your veterinarian ASAP. You can prevent consumption of these plants by making sure to remove them from any areas your goats have access to.

Yew- these decorative bushes are a common plant in many Northeast neighborhoods. Unfortunately, they are extremely toxic to all ruminant species. When consumed, this plant will release cardiogenic toxins that result in heart failure and sudden death in cattle, sheep, and goats. Being that this is not a plant commonly found in pastures or paddocks where ruminants are kept, most cases occur when owners unknowingly feed clippings or branches from the yew plant to their goats as a treat. Though goats enjoy treats from pine trees or other coniferous plants, the Yew plant is very dangerous and should be avoided at all costs.



Bracken Fern - these ferns are very common in the woods of the Northeast. Very commonly goats and other livestock are put out to graze/forage areas to clear the land of various flora. Though this can be a safe and enjoyable practice for all involved (goats love it), if eaten in excess over long periods of time, Bracken fern can have toxic effects. Excessive consumption of bracken fern can result in gastrointestinal upset, internal bleeding, and death. Goats will usually avoid bracken fern if there is other forage available. The best way to prevent bracken fern poisoning is to provide hay and other means of forage for the goats to eat while clearing the area. Also, leaving out free choice baking soda can help prevent gastrointestinal upset as the goats consume a variety of plants. If you are concerned about bracken fern poisoning, contact your veterinarian ASAP.

Poison Hemlock - As the name gives away, Poison Hemlock is very toxic to ruminants. Luckily, ruminants do not typically eat the plant if other forages are available. This plant causes neurological symptoms, abortion, and sudden death. Like Bracken fern, the best way to prevent consumption of poison hemlock is to keep other forage available at all times.



St. John's Wort - This weed can be commonly found in pastures. Most ruminants will avoid it due to its poor palatability. However, if all other forage is scarce, they will eat it. This plant causes photosensitization hypersensitivity (AKA severe sunburn). St. John's wort and similar plants, cause damage to the liver which results in the skin being hypersensitive to the sun. This is most commonly seen on the udders of dairy goats and cattle, skin of white coat cattle and goats, faces of sheep, or testicles of rams, bulls, and bucks. To avoid St. John's wort toxicity, make sure grazing or browsing ruminants have plenty of available forage when on pasture.



Alfalfa and Clover - this one usually comes as a surprise. Alfalfa and clover are a great source of calcium and protein for lactating female cattle, sheep, and goats. However, alfalfa and clover both carry a high amount of estrogen and calcium that can be toxic to male ruminants and non lactating female ruminants. Excessive calcium in alfalfa can lead to urinary calculus formation in male neutered ruminants, especially whether goats. It is important to keep male neutered goats off of grain, alfalfa hay, and any treats containing alfalfa to prevent urinary calculus formation and urethral blockage. The estrogen in alfalfa and clover can cause mammary development in non-lactating females and even in male ruminants. This condition is known as precocious udder. Though usually not life threatening, it can lead to discomfort and possible infection in the mammary tissue. The best way to prevent these issues, is to feed grass hay forage to all male and non-lactating female ruminants.

There are many other species of plants that can cause toxicity to ruminants. If you have concerns as to what is safe to feed your herd or flock, please reach out to Tri-State Veterinary Services LLC to set up and appointment to go over your forage and pasture protocols. If you are concerned that you ruminant may have ingested a toxic plant, call Tri-State Vet or your regular herd veterinarian immediately.