



## Livestock Management

Robert E. Pitts, Veterinarian  
WVU Extension Service

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### Many Plants Can Poison Cattle

The list of substances and plants that have the potential to poison cattle is extremely long; it would require a book to thoroughly cover all possibilities. The following is just a small sample of poisonous plants commonly found in West Virginia.

Before discussing individual plants, it is important to recognize that management is a major factor in most plant poisonings. In the majority of cases, livestock will not graze on poisonous plants if alternative feedstuffs are available and if they are not hungry.

Be observant and do not turn cattle in or leave cattle on pastures in which poisonous plants are the only available green feedstuff. If cattle are to be turned out in new pastures, attempt to feed them ahead of time to reduce their hunger and decrease the chance of them gluttonously eating poisonous plants.

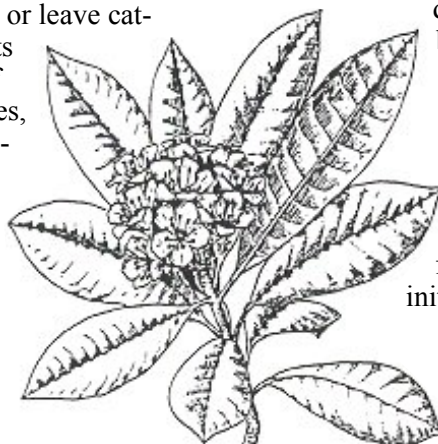
Mountain laurel is one plant commonly found in the state's eastern mountainous areas. Although deer commonly feed on the leaves, they can be toxic to cattle. In early spring, cattle sometimes eat the leaves, since they are the only green plant available. Signs of toxicity may include staggering, abdominal pain, excessive salivation, bloat, stiff gait, lying down, and death. Animals are sometimes treated with atropine, mineral oil, and laxatives.

Cocklebur is one of the first plants to sprout in the spring. Even though the seeds are the most toxic, the sprouts are also toxic if eaten. Some symptoms cattle may exhibit include depression, lack of gut motility, lack of coordination, drop in milk production, difficult breathing, and muscle spasms. Symptoms may develop over a few hours or a couple of days, and death may result. Unfortunately, treatment is quite limited after symptoms are observed. Sometimes, cattle are given

olive oil or mineral oil to try to flush their digestive system and limit the absorption of the toxic substance.

Another consideration in the spring is the weather. Severe storms with high winds may knock down tree limbs. The leaves of wild cherry trees are one of the most toxic sources for cattle. In the fresh state, the leaves are not toxic. After they begin to wilt, they are a source of hydrocyanic acid, which may cause death within an hour if enough is consumed. Bark and twigs from the cherry tree are also toxic. If the animal is not found

dead, early symptoms may include rapid breathing, muscle incoordination, bloat, excitability, and laying down. The blood and mucous membranes of these animals become bright red. If symptoms are observed in time, treatment includes intravenous injections of sodium nitrite and sodium thiosulfate. Sodium thiosulfate may also be given orally after the initial treatment.



Mountain laurel leaves are toxic to cattle.

One source of unintentional poisoning is ornamental shrubs that the owner or a neighbor may provide the cattle. Many people prune their ornamental yard shrubs early in the year. The leaves, bark, and seeds of the yew plant, for example, contain toxic alkaloids that are quite deadly to livestock if ingested. Owners have reported observing their cattle drop dead, without showing previous symptoms, after they have eaten clippings of these plants. In the rare case when symptoms are observed before death, they may include incoordination, labored breathing, weakness, and muscle tremors. Because there is no treatment, most cattle die.

This is a brief description of only a few poisonous plants. The best thing a producer can do to prevent these problems is to provide a highly palatable source of feed to discourage cattle from ingesting toxic plants.