

## POISONOUS PLANTS

Not all poisonings are fatal; sometimes the result can be serious digestive upsets, convulsions or your donkey may be off colour. We recommend that you buy good quality hay and check that it does not contain poisonous plants.

Prevention is better than cure:

- Pull out ragwort and remove any acorns from paddocks.
- Check paddock boundaries for evidence of poisonous plants and safely remove.
- Check on the other side of the boundary to a distance a donkey could reach.
- Ensure that your neighbours aren't dumping garden waste in your paddock.
- Make sure that your boundaries are secure.
- Break open hay bales and discard any plants that you cannot identify.

If you suspect your donkey has eaten parts of poisonous plants or trees, or the donkey shows any unusual symptoms, call your vet immediately.

Please note that this list of poisonous plants does not include every poisonous plant found in the UK and Ireland.

### Feed shortage

When your donkeys may be short of food supply, i.e. in conditions such as droughts or heavy snow falls, they will be more inclined to eat any available foliage, such as your prize rhododendron or the yew tree they can only just reach. They are also more likely to break out to gain access to gardens and woodlands where they will find all sorts of plants not normally available to them.

### Pasture Management

Poor pasture management and overgrazing can lead to the predominance of poisonous plants such as ragwort and bracken. Poisonous plants are also readily eaten after the application of weed-killers or if pulled up or cut and left lying around. Thoughtless disposal of garden rubbish, such as hedge trimmings containing yew or privet etc, is a cause of sporadic cases of poisoning. If material of this sort is thrown into the donkeys' field, their curiosity is aroused and they will eat it. Boredom is also a key contributor to the eating of hedgerow and unsavoury foliage. Consequently, it is important to be vigilant and control poisonous plants in and around your land.

### Common Poisonous Plants

Please note that in our experience acute plant poisoning in donkeys is rare.

**Ragwort - High Risk** and a common cause of chronic liver disease. Ragwort acts as a cumulative poison, eventually destroying the liver.

- Ragwort is a yellow flowering weed and is poisonous both dead and alive.
- Ragwort can cause serious liver damage over a period of time.
- Ragwort must be pulled with gloves in the early floret stage and burnt.
- Be very aware of this weed both on your pasture and in the hay.

For further information on identification and how to control ragwort please contact The Donkey Sanctuary Welfare Department for a ragwort leaflet.



Ragwort - flowering stage (August)



Ragwort - rosette stage (April - May)

### Horsetail (Mare's Tail)

- All varieties are poisonous but field horsetail and marsh horsetail are most likely to cause poisoning.
- It is a perennial plant with creeping underground stems from which green, jointed, upright stems grow in spring.
- Poisoning is most likely to occur when horsetail is present in hay or bedding.



Horsetail (Mare's Tail)

### Bracken

- Bracken is a common fern that grows throughout Britain and you must be careful it does not dominate your grassland.
- The whole plant contains several toxic substances, some of which remain after cutting and drying. The root of bracken is five times more poisonous than the fronds.



Bracken

### Rhododendron

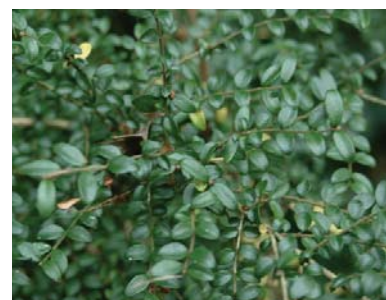
- An evergreen shrub with tough and leathery elongated leaves, dark green above and paler beneath.
- The large cone shaped buds develop into domed clusters of bell shaped flowers.
- Rhododendrons are often eaten when animals escape and eat the hedgerow or garden refuge or when food is scarce.
- Can kill after a few hours of being eaten.



Rhododendron

### Privet

- Wild privet is a branched shrub, found on chalky soils and garden privet is a popular hedge plant.
- The wild species has narrow, pointed, smooth leaves that are bright green and shiny when young and become darker and dull as they mature.
- Those of the garden privet are shorter, rarely more than 3cm long and are more oval in shape with small white flowers with a tubular base and a sweetish smell, black berries appear in the autumn.
- Most cases of poisoning involve garden trimmings.



Privet

## Hemlock

Common to Britain, generally associated with damp places, and often in the hedgerows.

- Hemlock will grow to 6ft in height.
- It has large fine cauliflower type flowers in abundance on each stem.
- Poisoning is most likely in spring when young leaves are eaten with other herbage, or on poor pasture.



Hemlock

## Ivy

- This evergreen climber is found all over UK, it is tough and attaches itself to trees, fences or walls and even climbs along the ground.
- Leaves are dark green and often in the shape of a triangle.
- If large quantities of leaves and berries are eaten it can become serious.



Ivy

## Poisonous Trees

### Yew

- Yew is considered by some to be the most toxic plant in Britain, and its poison, which is most toxic in winter, is absorbed rapidly from the digestive tract and interferes with the heart action.
- In many cases animals die only a few hours after eating yew, so signs are never seen.



Yew

### Oak

- The British Oaks are usually deciduous trees up to 30 m tall with rough, fissured bark and broad spreading branches.
- Leaves have smoothly indented wavy margins, and the acorns are shed when ripe. If animals eat a large quantity of oak leaves or acorns then oak poisoning is likely.
- The most likely time for this is when grazing is scarce.



Oak

### Fruit trees

Although not poisonous at all, we have included fruit trees, because during the autumn when they are full of fruit, the fruit can cause digestive upsets in donkeys. We recommend that the trees should be fenced off to prevent donkeys gorging themselves on the fruit.

## Further information

The following books are recommended for further information.

- A Guide to Plants Poisonous to Horses by Keith Allison. Veterinary Advisor - Christopher Day MRCVS.
- All about Poisonous Plants by Sonia Davidson.