POISONOUS PLANTS

PLANT POISONING IS AVOIDABLE!
HERE ARE SOME GUIDELINES TO HELP KEEP YOUR DONKEYS SAFE:-

Before your donkeys graze any new pasture check it thoroughly for the presence of toxic plants. A list of common poisonous plants is below but this is by no means comprehensive please refer to one of the books/websites listed below, if you are not sure about plant identification or toxicity.

When grazing is sparse your donkeys may be short of food, i.e. in conditions such as droughts or heavy snow falls or during dieting, they will be more inclined to eat any available foliage. Bear in mind that donkeys can stretch over fencing to reach plants/trees growing outside the field boundary such as your prize rhododendron or the yew tree they can only just reach and that leaves, fruits and seeds from remote plants can blow into paddocks. 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. Even when donkeys are turned out to pasture always ensure your donkey has access to suitable forage, we recommend providing barley straw so that there is always something to eat or a short chop product if your donkey has poor dentition.

Poor pasture management and overgrazing can lead to the predominance of poisonous plants such as ragwort and bracken.

Some poisonous plants are bitter in the green (fresh) state but become sweeter if dried out e.g. if sprayed with weed killer, pulled and left in the field or baled in hay. If you are pulling up plants always remove them from the paddock immediately. Always check each section of hay and remove any dried herbage that is unfamiliar to you.

Thoughtless disposal of garden rubbish, such as hedge trimmings containing yew or privet etc, is the most common cause of sporadic cases of poisoning. Let your well-meaning neighbours know that any garden waste such as hedge clippings or grass cuttings are potentially fatal, and should never be put in the paddock.

If you take your donkeys for walks or to events make sure they cannot access poisonous plants. For instance yew is one of the most toxic plants in the UK and is commonly found in church yards, so if your donkey is attending a Christmas Nativity they may attempt to snatch a bite.

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE INGENUITY OF DONKEYS! IF THEY CAN ESCAPE THEY WILL AND THEN YOU HAVE NO CONTROL OVER WHAT THEY MAY EAT. CHECK YOUR BOUNDARIES REGULARLY!
Some trees are quite safe for most of the year but need to be fenced off during the fruiting season. This includes all fruit trees, beech and oak trees.

Curiosity and boredom are key factors in the eating of unsavoury foliage and plant matter; good fencing and the provision of safe boredom breakers such as bramble, gorse or herb patches or cut branches from hazel, ash, hawthorn, apple, limited willow, alder, lime and poplar trees (see ‘Safe trees and shrubs’ factsheet).

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE:

Plants can appear and grow quickly so check all boundaries for evidence of poisonous plants weekly and remove immediately. Always dispose of poisonous plants carefully to prevent donkeys accessing them and seeds being dispersed.

Always be on the lookout for poisonous plants when moving strip grazing fences, changing paddocks or poo picking your paddock.

SOME COMMON POISONOUS PLANTS FOUND IN THE U.K

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

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COMMON RAGWORT

ROSETTE STAGE – APRIL – MAY       FLOWERING STAGE - AUGUST

Ragwort is a yellow flowering weed and is poisonous both dead and alive. Ragwort is frequently seen on wasteland, verges and railway land whereby it spreads onto pasture land.

It normally takes two years to grow to maturity and then flowers biennially (every second year). However, if the stem is cut or mown, ragwort often becomes an annually flowering plant. Each plant can produce up to 150,000 seeds which have a 70% germination rate and can lie dormant in the soil for up to 20 years.

Be very aware of this weed both on your pasture and in the hay. Ragwort can cause serious liver damage over a period of time. Ragwort must be pulled with gloves and burnt. It should never be composted. Pull the plant up before it flowers to avoid spreading speeds.

HOW CAN I CONTROL RAGWORT ON MY LAND?

Control of ragwort is the only way to avoid ragwort poisoning. The Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort, available from the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), can provide further help. To eliminate the danger to your animals it is important to remove all potential sources of poisoning as quickly as possible and a control strategy must be employed.

HORSETAIL (MARE’S TAIL)

All varieties are poisonous but common horsetail and marsh horsetail are most likely to cause poisoning in the UK.

It is a perennial plant with a creeping underground stem from which green, jointed, upright stems grow in spring.

Control of mare’s tail is extremely difficult, if you experience this plant on your land we would advise talking to an agricultural specialist about available control methods.

Poisoning is most likely to occur when horsetail is present in hay or bedding.
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.

Donkeys may develop a taste for bracken when other forage is in poor supply.

Poisoning tends to be cumulative over a period of time.

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 garden hedgerow or garden clippings or when food is scarce.

Can kill after a few hours of being eaten.

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.

If you suspect your donkey has eaten parts of poisonous plants or trees, or the donkey shows any unusual symptoms call your vet immediately.
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 and is easily confused with other similar plants.
Poisoning is most likely in spring when young leaves are eaten with other herbage, or on poor pasture.

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.
Poisoning is most likely in spring when young leaves are eaten with other herbage, while on poor pasture.
If large quantities of leaves and berries are eaten it can become serious.

FOXGLOVES

COMMON THROUGHOUT BRITAIN

They can grow up to 1.5m high. The flowers which appear over the summer are usually purple or white but can be in pastel colours as well. In the autumn the plant dries to a stick.

Toxins are present in foxgloves at all stages of growth.
All plants should be uprooted, taking care to remove the plants at the rosette stage of growth as well as those in flower.

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

YEW

Yew is considered to be the most toxic plant in Britain. In many cases animals die within a few hours of eating yew, so signs are rarely seen.

Donkeys should never have access to yew, care must be taken even with neighbouring trees from which branches or leaves may be blown many metres in high winds.

Be aware that yew trees are frequently found in church grounds. You must be aware of the risk if asked to take your donkeys to church for various religious festivals.

OAK AND ACORNS

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 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 or when acorns are green or shed in large quantities in the autumn. Oak trees should be fenced off, wide enough for the donkeys not to reach any branches or falling acorns. Poisoning by oak is usually seasonal, being most common in spring when the young buds or leaves are eaten and the autumn when the acorns are eaten.

BOX ELDER (ACER NEGUNDO) FOUND IN THE USA AND SYCAMORE (ACER PSEUDOPLATANUS)

FOUND IN THE UK

Both are implicated in a frequently fatal condition known as Atypical Myopathy (AM).

This condition leads to massive muscle loss and most fatalities occur within 1-2 days of symptoms appearing.

Research is pending but it is thought that the ‘helicopter’ sycamore seeds contain a toxin leading to severe metabolic damage.

The best way to prevent this happening is to fence sycamore trees off when seeds are present and ensure adequate provision of food to prevent donkeys searching out unusual feedstuffs.
FRUIT TREES

Although rarely poisonous, 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.

It is not recommended to feed or allow donkeys access to stoned fruit trees (e.g. cherry, peach etc.) as these fruits and trees may also contain poisonous substances.

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

THE FOLLOWING BOOKS/WEBSITES ARE RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Davidson, Sonia (2001) All about poisonous plants (Allen photographic guide) J.A. Allen & company Ltd

www.bsbi.org.uk
www.first-nature.com