



## **POISONOUS PLANTS AND TREES**

### **GUIDELINES TO KEEPING 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 overleaf but this is by no means exhaustive. Please refer to one of the books/websites listed overleaf if you are not sure about plant identification or toxicity.

- Poisoning is more likely to occur in situations when grazing is sparse and donkeys are short of food. Donkeys will be inclined to eat any available foliage during droughts, heavy snowfalls or when food is restricted due to dieting.
- 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. Also leaves, fruits and seeds from remote plants can blow into paddocks. Donkeys are also more likely than horses 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 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, eg 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 (eg hedge trimmings containing species such as yew or privet) is the most common cause of sporadic cases of poisoning. Let your well-meaning neighbours know that any garden waste trimmings or clippings (including 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. Therefore 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; ensure 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 to minimise the risk (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 UK

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

Black Bryony	Ivy	<b>Trees to avoid:</b>
Black Nightshade	Larkspur	Black Walnut
Bracken	Lily of the Valley	Elder
Buttercup	Linseed	Horse Chestnut
Celandine	Meadow Saffron	Laburnum
Charlock	Monkshood	Laurel
Columbine	Potato	Laurel Cherry
Cowbane	Privet	Leylandii
Deadly Nightshade	Ragwort	Oak
Foxglove	Rhododendron	Plum
Ground Ivy	St John's Wort	Peach
Hellebore	Spurge	Red Maple
Hemlock	Water Hemlock	Sycamore*
Hemlock Water-Dropwort	White Bryony	Wild Cherry
Holly Berries	Woody Nightshade	Yew
Horsetail (Mare's tail)		

\* Sycamore seeds/seedlings, flowers and leaves are implicated in the development of potentially fatal atypical myopathy, however cut logs (minus leaves/flowers/seeds) are safe to use for enrichment.



### 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 and can be fatal if consumed over a period of one to two months.

#### ALERT

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 (CONIUM MACULATUM), HEMLOCK WATER-DROPWORT (OENANTHE CROCATATA) AND WATER HEMLOCK (CICUTA SPP.)

There are three main species of 'hemlock' which are common to Britain. A shared feature amongst them all are the white, cauliflower-type flowers. Each type may or may not have purple or blotchy purple stems and leaves. Plants are poisonous fresh or dried. Symptoms can occur 15 minutes to six hours after the plant has been ingested. Poisoning is most likely to occur in spring when young leaves are eaten with other herbage, or on poor pasture.

**Ingestion of any hemlock in any quantity can result in death or permanent damage to the central nervous system.**



1) Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) (pics 1 and 2 aphoto.com)

Contains highly toxic alkaloids which act on the nervous system, death may occur within a couple of hours of ingestion.

Usually found growing in woodlands and hedgerows. Purple blotches appear on the stem as the plant begins to mature. Can reach up to 1.8 metres in height. Has a bitter taste and an unpleasant smell.

All parts of the plant (including roots) are poisonous, with seeds being the most toxic.



2) Hemlock Water Dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*) (pics 3&4 aphoto.com)

Contains an extremely dangerous and toxic poison which acts rapidly on the central nervous system.

Usually found growing near water, can reach up to 1.5 metres in height. The plant is sweet smelling and tasting.

All parts of the plant are toxic, with roots containing the most toxin.



3) Water Hemlock (*Cicuta* spp.) (pic 5 allcreatures.org)

Contains an extremely dangerous and fatal toxin which affects the central nervous system.

Generally associated with damp places, common in meadows and at the water's edge.

May grow to 2.5 metres in height.

All parts of the plant are toxic, with the roots containing the most toxin.

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## COMMON RAGWORT

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 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 – symptoms can be vague and may take up to six months to become apparent.**

Ragwort must be pulled with gloves and burnt. It should never be composted. Pull the plant up before it flowers to avoid spreading seeds.

## 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.

Please see 'poisonous plants: ragwort' factsheet for further information.



## 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 tends to be cumulative and can be fatal if consumed over a period of one to two months. Most likely to occur when horsetail is present in hay or bedding.**

It is an offence under the Weeds Act 1959 (England, Wales and Scotland) to allow uncontrolled growth of ragwort. This legislation is enforced by the local authority.



## RHODODENDRON

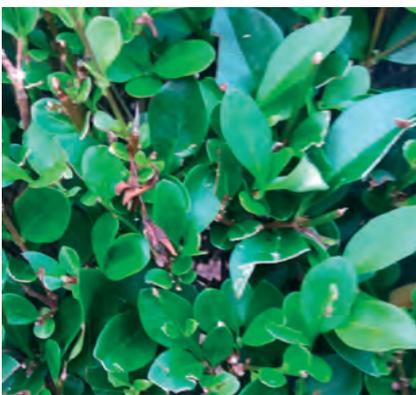
An evergreen shrub with tough and leathery, elongated leaves, dark green above and paler beneath.

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, causing death by respiratory failure.

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## PRIVET

Wild privet is a branched shrub, found on chalky soils, and garden privet is a popular hedge plant. Both species are poisonous, the berries particularly so.

They produce small, white flowers with a tubular base and a sweetish smell. Black berries appear in the autumn.

Most cases of poisoning involve garden trimmings.

**Consumption of even a small amount can cause death within 4 to 48 hours.**



## IVY

This evergreen climber is found all over the 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 1.5 metres 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.

**The toxins present in foxgloves at all stages of growth can interfere with electrical conductivity of the heart, causing erratic heartbeat and eventually death by heart attack.**

The leaves have a bitter taste and so it is usually only eaten dry in hay.

All plants should be uprooted, taking care to remove the plants at the rosette stage of growth as well as those in flower.

## POISONOUS TREES



### YEW

**Yew is considered to be the most toxic plant in Britain. One mouthful is enough to cause death by heart failure.**

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 of the risk if asked to take your donkeys to church for various religious festivals, as yew trees are frequently found in church grounds.

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### OAK AND ACORNS

British Oaks are usually deciduous trees up to 30 metres tall with rough, fissured bark and broad, spreading branches. Leaves have smoothly indented, wavy margins, and acorns are shed when ripe.

The tannins in oak/acorns can cause gastrointestinal problems if eaten in a large quantity.

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 is usually seasonal, being most common in spring when the young buds/leaves are eaten and in the autumn when acorns are eaten.**



### SYCAMORE (ACER PSEUDOPLATANUS)

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

A toxin within the 'helicopter' sycamore seed/seedlings, flowers and leaves can cause severe metabolic damage.

This condition leads to massive muscle loss and most fatalities occur within one to two days of symptoms appearing.

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

Please see 'sycamore-related atypical myopathy' factsheet for more information.



## FRUIT AND NUT TREES

Although rarely poisonous, we have included fruit trees because during the autumn when they are full of fruit and nuts, eating an abundance of fruit or nuts can cause digestive upsets in donkeys.

**We recommend that the trees should be fenced off to prevent donkeys gorging themselves on fallen fruit/nuts.**

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

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### **The following books/websites are recommended for further information:**

Allison, Keith (2011) A guide to plants poisonous to horses. Revised edition.  
JA Allen & Company Ltd

Davidson, Sonia (2001) All about poisonous plants (Allen photographic guide).  
JA Allen & Company Ltd

**[www.bsbi.org.uk](http://www.bsbi.org.uk)**

**[www.first-nature.com](http://www.first-nature.com)**