Poisonous Plants in Florida Endangering Beef Cattle

For two decades Multi-County Livestock Agent Dennis Mudge has assisted cattlemen with the risk and problem solving of cattle that have eaten toxic plants. Too often the call comes after a calf, cow or even a number of cows have died. Dennis has become an expert in this field receiving requests every few days from cattle producers, veterinarians, county agents, 4-H leaders, FFA advisors, and small farm cattle owners. These requests come not just from through Florida but neighboring states as well.

The financial loss each year is staggering. Far too many cattle die needlessly. The key to saving these animals lives is prevention through improved management. Ignoring the problem will only cost you money. At today’s prices this is serious!

The actual number of cattle lost to poisonous plants is higher than reported due to symptoms that can be wrongly diagnosed. This is because they often are similar to other health issues like pneumonia, infections, renal failure, colic, depression, heart failure, hyperactivity, gastritis, blood disorders, and the list goes on and on. Too often the correct diagnosis happens when every other possible cause has been eliminated.
Beware
Cattle ranchers themselves may deny the seriousness of toxic plants for good reason. They very often have seen the cattle eat the plant in question with very little or no visible issues or side effects seen. The reasons for this are complicated. For starters, there are two basic types of poisoning: chronic and acute. While some plants are quick killers, many more accumulate poison like arsenic and kill slowly building up in the cows system over time. There are many other reasons why delayed sickness occurs but be sure if your cows are eating toxic plants they are being poisoned! An old timer practice was to use cattle to clear unwanted weeds in this way thinking they get as much nutrition out of weeds as they do grasses.
This is not only not true but also a very dangerous practice!

Management is the Key
Why take this serious risk unnecessarily?
Here are some steps to take:

- Learn the poisonous plants common to pastures
- Take a University of Florida class on toxic plants
- Practice weed management control on your property
- Manage your improved pasture grasses to force out weeds
- Remove the most serious toxic plants
- Practice regular pasture scouting for toxic plants
- Purchase the UF poster showing poisonous plants in the pasture at [http://ifasbooks.ifas.ufl.edu/p-510-poisonous-pasture-plants-of-florida.aspx](http://ifasbooks.ifas.ufl.edu/p-510-poisonous-pasture-plants-of-florida.aspx)
- Do not use cattle to clear out lands or woods that don't have adequate available pasture
The toxic weed list is not just certain native plants but it also includes numerous invasive exotics introduced from other parts of the world. Listed in the following are some weeds that have killed cattle in Florida in significant numbers as witnessed by Agent Mudge.
Cattle That Are Most At Risk

- Young Stock
- Cattle on overgrazed pastures
- Any cattle recently moved to a new pasture
- Cattle grazed in woods for the first time
- Cattle grazed along bodies of water
- Cattle eating hay with dry toxic plants in it

**Also at risk are:**

- Cattle supplemented in the winter (ie. cubes) who go looking for roughage
- Penned cattle surround by toxic weeds in the pen
- Cattle who have eaten a large amount of toxic plants
- Cattle that have eaten poisonous plants for years
- Cattle in pastures with little or no weed control