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Animal Health Fact Sheet

YEW HAD BETTER WATCH OUT!

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If you see clippings from ornamental, evergreen shrubs that someone has dumped where cattle, horses, sheep, etc., can eat them, you had better move the plants or the animals. If you don't, expect some dead animals.

Ornamental yew shrubs are highly toxic to animals and trimmings are often placed where animals can eat them. There have been at least two incidents of herd poisonings in Utah cattle. In one of these, 35 out of 43 pregnant 2-year old heifers died and in the other 7 of 30 died. Both of these resulted when someone other than the owner discarded portions of the shrubs in a grazing area where the cattle were located. The estimated minimum losses were $25,000 and $5,000 respectively for these two producers.

English yew (Taxus baccata) is a tree-like shrub that can grow 80 feet tall. Japanese yew (Taxus cuspidata) is a low growing shrub. Other varieties have also been horticulturally developed. They are commonly referred to as just yew or ground hemlock. They are very popular evergreen, ornamental shrubs and are commonly planted around public buildings, along driveways and around the foundations of homes. They can be trimmed and shaped as hedges or as individual shrubs. The leaves are stiff, about 1-inch long, needle like, alternate, glossy and dark green on the upper surface and yellow-green on the lower surface. The bark is reddish-brown and scaly. The mature seeds are located inside a bright red cup called an aril. All plant parts are toxic, except the red aril, and remain toxic even after drying.

The toxin contained in yew is a group of alkaloids called taxin. It exerts its toxic action upon the heart and the primary (and often the only) sign of poisoning is sudden death. Most animals die within 4 hours of ingestion and within just minutes of the first abnormal signs. The poisoned animal may tremble, have difficulty breathing, and then collapse and die. Or, it may appear normal and suddenly just drop dead. A few animals may linger for several hours after the initial signs appear.

Undigested plant parts are easily identified in the rumen of dead animals and their presence is diagnostic of yew poisoning.

Yew is not highly palatable, but animals do not have to be starving before they will eat it. Frequently, the young, more curious animals are those that graze the plant first, thus attracting other animals to the unfamiliar feed. The more aggressive feeding animals tend to eat the most and are usually the first to die.

In addition to trimmed branches, watch out for shrubs growing along a fence line where livestock can reach and graze them and even for needles raked up in lawn clippings and fed to animals. Only very small amounts are needed to cause death; for example: cattle—3/4-1 lb., horses, sheep and goats—1/4-1/2 lb., swine—1/4 lb. and poultry—1/10 lb. Even humans have been poisoned with yew.

Be alert to keep yew away from your animals. Be a good neighbor and DON'T feed YOUR shrub trimmings to THEIR animals.

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