

Stupid Trees to have around horses

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There are a few trees and bushes that have been proven fatal to horses. Certainly, experience should be something that we all should benefit from in protecting the future health of our horses. Also, as our horses become more suburbanized and move toward the city from the farm, these suburban environments believe in a significant amount of landscaping and the protection of our trees. Also, when we consider any kind of toxic situation, anything that is not normal within the horse's diet, such as weeds, fruit, vegetables, etc. can, when eaten at a significant level, cause, at minimum, GI problems, and potentially death. So, any horse that develops some aberrant eating behavior, whether taught by us as the owner or they developed it on their own, should be critically examined and the behavior should be changed.

There are three plants that should not be anywhere near a horse, whether in a pasture, on a fence line, around a ring where horses gather, in show facilities, on breeding farms, etc. These three plants are Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*), Wild Cherry (*Prunus serotina*), and Oleander (*Nerium oleander*). These are trees that all grow in the southeast. Two of the trees grow significantly in the Southeast. Red Maple is selected as an ornamental and used in landscaping, but also grows in the wild. Wild Cherry is not usually used in landscaping, but does grow wild in the area. Oleander is more of a bush and is not as common as the other two, but is even more fatal to the horse and also to children.

Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*)



Red maple is a leaf that, when ingested in a certain amount causes significant breakdown of red blood cells and is an extremely difficult, expensive treatment, which is most often unsuccessful. The usual situation involves horses eating the leaves from branches that

blow off of a red maple tree during a storm or, in the fall, wilting leaves fall from a tree in the pasture or are blow into the pasture. Clinical signs include weakness, depression, increased heart and respiratory rates, dark red urine, yellow colored mucus membranes, occurs one to three days following ingestion of leaves or bark. Break down of red blood cells is a cause of death. Several horses per year die from this problem in North Carolina.

Wild Cherry (*Prunus serotina*)



Wild cherry was involved in one of the most equine toxic and costly situations in American history. It was involved with the Mare Reproduction Loss Syndrome in Lexington, Kentucky, where Eastern Tent Caterpillars were ingesting the leaves, concentrating the cyanide poison, and, in an unknown way contributed to the resorption and death of many equine fetuses in 2002. These trees grew up as volunteers along the fence line and were occasionally present inside the pasture. Cyanide is the toxic principle and is a toxin that is required in very small amounts in order to cause damage. Wilted leaves may contain significant amounts of cyanide. The cyanide potential is greatest three to four days after branches have been cut or blown down. Dry leaves are not hazardous to horses. Horses can show signs within an hour of eating wilted leaves. Clinical signs include severe respiratory distress, even sudden death. It behooves owners to walk pastures after storms to make sure red maples and/or wild cherry limbs have not blown into the pasture.

Oleander (*Nerium oleander*)



Oleander is more commonly seen on the West Coast, but is part of the landscaping in the Southeast. Oleander does not generally grow in North Carolina unless it is intentionally planted. With respect to urbanization of horses, oleander has been used in landscaping around barns and between paddocks since the leaves are evergreen and the flowers are quite spectacular when the bush is in bloom. A child using an oleander stick to cook a hotdog over a fire can be killed by the small amount of toxin absorbed from the stick by the hotdog. Ten leaves can kill a horse. Oleander contains toxins that affect the cardiac function of horses resulting in a fairly painful death within 2 to 3 days. There is no antidote for the toxin.

So, the name “Stupid trees to have around horses”

Making sure that you know these trees and know that they are not within any kind of oral contact with your horse, whether at your farm or at a horse show. If you see them somewhere off your property where there are other horses, please pass on this information to that particular owner.

A list of plants and weeds in North Carolina toxic to horses can be found at <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/copubs/ag/livestock/horse/002/>