

Milkvetches

Various “Astragalus” species (there are over 3,000 in total, of which 263 are toxic)

Other Common Names: Milk-vetches (many specific variety names of milkvetches or milk-vetches), pea vine, goat’s thorn, *huang qi* (Chinese medicine)

Species Affected: horses, cattle & sheep

Description: Milkvetches are part of the legume family, and are broadly similar in appearance to bean or pea plants. Some are annuals and some are perennials.

Growing Location and Timing: Toxic milkvetch species grow in various environments in the Rocky Mountain states, including in meadows, forests, and dry/desert areas. It emerges between April and June, depending on elevation and snowmelt. It becomes less toxic once seeds disperse and plant parts dry out, typically in July or August.

Toxin: Nitrogen compounds (different toxic “nitro” compounds in different milkvetches)

Toxic Plant Parts: All parts of the plants may be toxic. Toxicity decreases when plants dry up.

Possible Effects on Livestock: Symptoms can include but are not limited to respiratory distress, muscular weakness, nervousness, fetlock knuckling, “cracker heels,” difficulty walking, temporary blindness, digestive issues, brain hemorrhage, and death within four hours. Animals with advanced chronic poisoning typically do not recover but waste away slowly over months. Lactating cows are at higher risk than other cows.

Preventative Measures: Do not force poisoned animals to move as this can cause them to collapse and die. Prevent animals from grazing on these plants for prolonged periods. Protein supplements may help to prevent intoxication. Younger cows (under 3 years old) are more susceptible to poisoning than older ones.

Resources: [Meet the marvelous milk-vetches | U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service \(fws.gov\)](#)

[Astragalus \(plant\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Milkvetch \(Astragalus spp.\) : USDA ARS](#)



COLUMBIA MILKVETCH

Picture Source: Paul Slichter / science.halleyhosting.com



COTTAM'S MILKVETCH

Picture source: University of New Mexico



CANADIAN MILKVETCH

Picture Source: identifythatplant.com



SLENDER MILKVETCH

Picture source: minnesotawildflowers.info