USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Illinois Grazing Manual Fact Sheet
SPECIES • POISONOUS PLANTS

Bouncing Bet

Plants of fencerows, roadsides, barnyards, fields, and waste places

Plant Characteristics

Saponaria officinalis L.: Bouncing bet is an erect perennial herb from 1 to 3 feet tall, with smooth, little-branched stems that arise from rhizomes. The oppositely arranged, elliptic leaves are 3 to 4 inches long, and have 3 to 5 main veins. The margins of the leaves lack teeth. The pink to white flowers, which appear form July to September, usually form congested clusters at the summits of the stems. The fruit is a many-seeded capsule that opens by 4 teeth. The seeds are round or kidney-shaped, black, and minutely roughened.

Occurrence

Bouncing bet, a native of the Old World, was formerly cultivated, but has escaped and become a weed of roadsides, railroad trackways, and fallow fields throughout North America. It seems to prefer sandy soil, and in such situations, forms sizable colonies.

Conditions of Poisoning

The abundance of bouncing bet along roadsides and in other wastelands makes it easily accessible to animals allowed to graze in these areas. Although the entire plant is poisonous, the seeds contain the largest concentration of the poisonous principle. Most animals, however, refuse to eat the grain or screenings containing the seeds, and poisoning from browsing the leaves is usually mild.

Control

If roadside and pasture grasses are dry in late summer, animals should not be grazed in places where bouncing bet is abundant. The plant should be controlled because it is a nuisance as a weed as well as a danger to livestock.

Toxic Principles

The stems and leaves and, especially, the roots and seeds of bouncing bet contain a peculiar chemical substance known as a saponin that is undoubtedly the poisonous principle.

Clinical Signs

The poison irritates the digestive tract. Depending upon the amount eaten, an animal may exhibit the following signs: nausea, vomiting, rapid pulse, dizziness, and diarrhea. Depressed breathing has also been reported. Animals rarely die of bouncing-bet poisoning.

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Treatment

Treatment is the same as that used to cure poisoning by corn cockle and cow cockle or cow-herb—the judicious use of digitalis, together with oils and demulcents given by mouth.

References

Evers, Robert A., and Roger P. Link. Poisonous Plants of the Midwest and Their Effects on Livestock, 1972. Special Publication 24, College of Agriculture, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.