



Common Cocklebur



Photo by: Clarence A. Rechenthin
Hosted by the USDA-NRCS
PLANTS Database

Plant Characteristics

Xanthium pensylvanicum: This coarse widely branching, annual herb can grow to .2 to 1.7 m (1-2 ft.) tall. The leaves are alternate, simple, coarsely pubescent, shallowly 3 to 5 lobed. The flowers are green, inconspicuous, male and female borne in separate clusters. The fruit is a bur, broadly cylindrical, to nearly spherical, spiny, 1.5 to 3 cm long, including spines. The two seeded bur is greenish to brown at maturity. This plant is a native annual weed, found throughout the south and across much of the Midwest in row crop fields, gardens, roadsides, and other areas exposed to full sun. It is most abundant in fertile, moist soils.

Toxicity

The toxic principle is the glycoside, hydroquinone. It is concentrated in the seeds and seedlings (cotyledon stage). Mature plants are distasteful to animals and contain less of the toxin. The tender, juicy cotyledons, which are long and narrow, contain carboxyatractyloside, which affects the nervous system.

Symptoms

Signs of poisoning include anorexia, depression, and weakened heartbeat. Swine are the animals most commonly poisoned. They root up and ingest the two-leaf stage of the plant in the springtime. Symptoms include vomiting and gastrointestinal irritation with occasional diarrhea. Large amounts often cause nervous symptoms including spasmodic running movements and convulsions. Chickens and other animals have also been poisoned. Sheep have been known to eat the two leafed stage plants as well.

Treatment

Treatment is of little to no value once the symptoms have been observed.

Information Sources

- Poisonous Plant of the Southern United States
- <http://plants.usda.gov/>
- Bulletin 762 Horse Nutrition Ohio State University.