



Sneezeweeds



Photo by: Jennifer Anderson-Cruz
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Photo by: James H. Miller
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Plants of fencerows, roadsides, barnyards, fields, and waste places.

Description

Helenium Autumnale is an erect, fibrous-rooted perennial with glabrous or finely pubescent stems that grow up to 5 feet tall. The stems support numerous lance-linear to narrowly egg-shaped leaves that are 2 to 6 inches long. The leaves are narrowed to stalkless bases that extend downward on the stems as greenish wings. The several to many flowering heads are disposed in leafy inflorescences. Each head, hemispheric or subglobose in shape, has a yellow disk from 3/8 to 3/4 inch across and 10 to 20 yellow rays from 3/8 to 1 inch long.

Helenium flexuosum Raf. is an erect, fibrous rooted perennial with more or less pubescent stems that grow 4 feet tall and are winged by the decurrent leaf bases. The lowermost leaves are oblanceolate in outline and are soon deciduous; other leaves are oblong or lanceolate and more persistent. The flowering heads are in open, bracted inflorescences. Each head has a purple or brownish-purple disk from 1/4 to 1/2 inch across and yellow rays from 1/4 to 3/4 inch long.

Helenium amarum (Raf.) H. Rock is a glabrous, glandular-dotted annual plant with stems from 8 to 20 inches tall. The stems support numerous linear leaves that are 1/16 inch wide. The flowering heads stand on short, naked peduncles that extend beyond the leafy part of the plant. Each head has a yellow disk from 1/4 to 3/8 inch across and 5 to 10 yellow rays from 1/4 to 3/8 inch-long that produce achenes.

Occurrence

Helenium autumnale grows in moist, low ground, especially along streams, from Quebec to British Columbia, and south to Florida and Arizona. *Helenium flexuosum* Raf. grows in moist, low ground from Maine to Michigan, and in southern Illinois and southern Missouri, south Florida and Texas. *Helenium amarum* (Raf.) H. Rock is a plant of prairies, open woods, fields, and waste places. It ranges from Virginia, Missouri, and Kansas, south to Florida, Texas, and Mexico, and is apparently spreading northward.

Conditions of Poisoning

Since sneezeweeds are bitter and sharp-tasting, most animals avoid them. But some animals, usually cows and sheep, develop a taste for sneezeweeds, and will eat large quantities. Although all parts of the plant are poisonous, the blossoms are the most dangerous. For this reason, most of the cases of serious poisoning occur in the late summer and early fall. Sneezeweeds may also cause cows to give bitter milk. The plants remain toxic when dried.

Toxic Principles

The exact nature of the poison has not been determined. It appears to be the glucoside dugaldin.



Clinical Signs

The usual signs of sneezeweed poisoning are rapid pulse, restlessness, difficult breathing, staggering, loss of muscular control, and extreme sensitivity to touch. After eating large quantities of sneezeweed blossoms, animals may die suddenly. Spasms and convulsions may precede death.

Necropsy

Gastrointestinal irritation, engorgement of the liver and kidney, and large necrotic areas in the lungs are lesions observed in most animals fatally poisoned by sneezeweed.

Treatment

If animals give bitter milk or show other mild clinical signs of sneezeweed poisoning, they should be removed at once to pastures where they will not have access to sneezeweed. Melted lard, if given before the spasms begin, will offset the action of the poison. A veterinarian may administer other indicated treatment.

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.



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