



Beware Azaleas Around Goats

By Jackie Nix

Azaleas are popular landscaping shrubs. After the initial spring bloom, many homeowners prune back these and other landscaping shrubs. However, beware of you or your neighbors throwing these clippings into the goat pen as a “treat”. In the case of Azaleas this treat could be deadly.

The popular flowering Azalea shrub and other plants from the Rhododendron family such as Mountain Laurel are toxic to all types of animals including goats. All parts of the plant contain the toxic compound, grayanotoxin, but especially the leaves and flower nectar. These grayanotoxins affect the gastrointestinal and cardiovascular systems.

Gastric signs develop first, generally within 6 hours of ingestion, including excessive salivating, vomiting, diarrhea, bloat and abdominal pain. Also, colic, increased vocalization, coughing, fever, generalized weakness, inability to stand, abnormal heartbeat and an increased respiratory rate may be observed. If a sufficient amount of Azalea leaves were consumed, convulsions may occur, followed by coma and death.

It is important to remember that "dose makes the poison". The amount eaten is critical. In the case of Azaleas, when an animal eats about 0.2% of its bodyweight in leaves, toxic symptoms are observed. For a 100-lb goat this translates to only 0.2 lbs or 3.2 oz. of Azalea leaves. For a 30-lb kid this amount is as little as 0.06 lbs or a little less than one ounce.

When symptoms of Azalea poisoning are observed, first remove the goat(s) from the toxic source. Remove Azaleas from the pasture or if that is too difficult, remove the goats from the pasture. For severely affected goats, contact a veterinarian immediately. Activated charcoal may be administered to help prevent absorption of toxins until the vet arrives. However, luckily not all affected animals will die, and livestock may recover without treatment, depending upon amount ingested. Animals may appear ill for two days or more, but then gradually recover. The good news is that animals that recover are unlikely to consume Azalea ever again.

Limiting the Risk of Azalea Poisoning

The first step to take is removal of all Azaleas and other plants from the Rhododendron family (including Mountain Laurel) from within easy reach of the goats. This means walking the fence line and creating a Rhododendron-free buffer. This is especially critical in areas where these plants are native. Goat owners may wish to abstain from use of Azaleas in their landscaping or only use them in areas in which the goats cannot gain

access. When planning this, please keep in mind all possibilities including occasional escapees from the pasture/barn.

Also, keep goats in good body condition and well fed so that they will not be as tempted to consume Azaleas. Lack of good forage is the most common cause of plant poisoning. This most commonly occurs in early spring, winter, late fall, during droughts, or any time an area has been overgrazed. In many instances, goats with a full stomach will be less susceptible to poisoning than those with an empty one under similar conditions. The reason is that rumen contents can act to dilute the poisonous compounds and to slow down their absorption.

Contrary to popular belief, goats are not born knowing which plants are poisonous and which are not. This knowledge is learned through the social interactions of the herd. In the wild, every goat eats the same kind of plants at the same time as the dominant or head goat in the herd. Young kids learn what forages are edible by mimicking older, more dominant goats. If kids are not allowed to interact with older goats, the flock can be susceptible to poisoning. With only a few exceptions, most adult goats will not eat poisonous plants unless forced to do so by unusual or artificial conditions. Although, unfortunately, sometimes goats consume poisonous plants, including Azaleas, for no discernable reason. This is often attributed to curiosity or plain bad luck

Goats may be more likely to consume poisonous plants if they lack required nutrients or if their diet is unbalanced. Mineral deficient goats may be drawn to plants that they normally would not eat in search of the minerals they are lacking. It is well known that healthy animals are more likely to survive and thrive after contact with a poisonous compound than unthrifty ones.

In summary, Azaleas are toxic to goats and should be avoided in general. Be sure to notify your neighbors of the toxicity of this plant so that they do not throw cuttings in to the goats in error. Symptoms of Azalea poisoning include vomiting, diarrhea, bloat, abdominal pain, coma and death. If poisoning is suspected, remove the goats from the suspected source of poison, and then call a vet.

Be sure that you provide a nutritionally balanced diet for your goats to prevent them from seeking out harmful plants in search for nutrients. Free choice access to any of the **Sweetlix® Meat Maker™ line of goat supplement products** will provide 100% of the goat's trace mineral needs, including copper and selenium. Good mineral nutrition will help produce healthy goats that will be more likely to survive accidental poisoning than unthrifty goats. For more information about these supplement products for goats contact your local Sweetlix® dealer location or visit www.sweetlix.com or call 1-87SWEETLIX.

Jackie Nix is an animal nutritionist with Sweetlix (<http://www.sweetlix.com>). You can contact her at jnix@sweetlix.com or 1-800-325-1486 for questions or to learn more about the Sweetlix line of mineral and protein supplement products for goats, cattle, horses, sheep and wildlife.

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