

## Native Forbs are Blooming, Including Death Camas

The native forbs are blooming, enhancing the prairie with splashes of color. Unfortunately, not all that is growing is desirable, according to Mary Rumph, Powder River Extension Agent. "In addition to the grass and desirable forbs, I noticed poisonous death camas is present and blooming," said Rumph.

The two most prevalent species are meadow death camas and mountain death camas. While both species can be found in Montana meadow death camas is the most common and can be found in foothills and on range. Meadow death camas as a native, cool-season forb. It is a perennial plant that can grow between 6-28 inches tall. The bulb of the plant is found between 2-8 inches below the soil surface. Its grass-like, v-shaped leaves grow mainly from the base of the stem and generally produce a single bolt with a cone-shaped head of flowers that have a greenish-white to cream coloring.

Early spring growth of death camas ahead of other forages creates an environment where livestock are more likely to eat the plants, especially in an overgrazed pasture. While death camas is generally non-palatable to livestock, a lack of other vegetation pushes them towards grazing available green forage.

Other times to be on the lookout for death camas consumption is after spring snow storms (the story of our recent lives) when it can be the only available plant above the snow.

All livestock, including cattle, horses, and sheep are susceptible to poisoning from death camas alkaloids. All parts of the plant have a toxic alkaloid present. Seeds are the most toxic, followed by the bulbs, leaves and then stems. Because sheep are more likely to graze forbs than other livestock, they tend to be poisoned more often, however, cattle are more sensitive to the alkaloids present in the plant. A 100 pound sheep may die eating only half-pound of green foliage. In other cases, it may take up to two pounds of green foliage consumption to be deadly.

Symptoms of death camas poisoning can occur several hours to one day after ingestion. These may include bloody, frothy salivation, depression and grinding of teeth. More severe symptoms include loss of coordination, weakness and staggering, a fast pulse that is weak, labored breathing and gasping, coma and eventual death due to heart failure.

There is no known treatment for death camas poisoning, so prevention is key. Well-fed animals are less likely to ingest death camas that may be present. Do not turn out livestock on pasture that has a lot of death camas without enough other vegetation for them to graze. Do not harvest and bale meadows with death camas present; the leaves will still be toxic when fed at a later date.

Death camas can be controlled in the early spring when the plant has three to six leaves by spraying 2,4-D. Detection at this stage might be difficult. When flowering bolts appear, it is too late for the herbicide to be effective. If it is a small area, hand pulling the entire plant, including the bulb out of ground is also an option. Use gloves and wash hands when finished.

Wild onion looks similar to death camas. There have been a few cases of persons mistakenly consuming death camas, thinking they were eating wild onion. One major difference between the two plants is that wild onion has a strong onion odor, whereas death camas has no odor to any part of the plant. If unsure, don't eat it.

For more information, contact the Powder River Extension Office at 436-2424.