Wild Onion

Allium spp.

There are 14 species and several varieties of wild onions in Texas. These biennial or perennial herbs have strong-scented (odor of garlic/onion), underground bulbs that give rise to long, narrow leaves.

The flowers are arranged in a terminal cluster attached to an unbranched stalk arising from the bulb between the leaves. Flower stalks may be 6 to 20 inches high with blooms of white, yellow, pink, red or purple. In some species, blooms are replaced by bulblets.

Distribution and habitat

Wild onions are widely distributed across the United States and are found during the spring in every region of Texas and in virtually every soil type. Regions: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10.

Toxic agent

Onions contain N-propyl disulfide, which destroys red blood cells. Cultivated onions contain the same toxin and are often used as livestock feed. Many onions are usually required to cause poisoning; often pastures containing onions are heavily grazed without problems. The amount of toxin in the plants varies based on factors that are not well understood.

Cattle and horses are susceptible to onion poisoning, and cats are very sensitive to it. Sheep are more resistant, but have been poisoned by onions in some instances.

Livestock signs

Acute signs usually develop after a long-term intake of the plants and include:

- Jaundice (yellowish mucous membranes)
- Depression
- Anorexia
- Weakness
- Dark red or brown urine

Animals showing clinical signs have a strong onion/garlic odor on the breath as well as in the stomach/rumen contents. Sick or dead animals may have an onion odor without onion poisoning.

The clinical signs, especially the yellow color and dark urine, must be present to confirm the diagnosis. Diseases such as leptosporosis can also cause these signs.

Integrated management strategies

Most onion poisoning occurs when animals are fed waste onions. However, some cases occur when cattle or horses are forced to consume large amounts of wild onions. Good range management with adequate forage production will prevent wild onion poisoning.