

CROFTON WEED kills horses

by Angela Davison - the Horse Herbalist



Crofton weed - (*Ageratina adenophora*) is beating the cane toads in its march south down the east coast of Australia. It's also now prevalent in all other states of Australia.

This plant, a native of Mexico, loves conditions in this country and like the cane toad it has no natural predators here. Biological controls have had limited success to date, and funding for research is minimal.

If you have this weed on your property then it is best to not have any horses in the paddock until such time as you can eradicate it. Its carrot-like odour can cause a horse that has eaten it to become addicted and seek it out. It is an insidious weed and very toxic as every mouthful causes damage to the horse's bronchioles and lung walls.

By the time physical symptoms manifest, such as cough or breathlessness, much damage has already taken place. Crofton hardens damaged cells and lung walls ulcerate and crumble so basically the horse is asphyxiated – they stand with their neck stretched and hind legs camped out, all to try and get oxygen as the lungs start to flood. They can run blind, collapse and die. A horrible death for your horse, or anyone's horse..

What to look for

Crofton weed is an erect, multi stemmed perennial plant which grows to 150cm in height. It's extremely hardy, it layers itself and will sprout from any tiny piece of root left in the ground and, like many weeds, it relishes poor soil conditions.

The plant has maroon coloured smooth stems, the broad leaves are green and have slightly dog-toothed edges and it develops dense clusters of white flowers in spring.

There are quite a few myths surrounding this weed and horses, a few of which are addressed here.

UNTRUE

It's untrue that horses that are being hard fed or on good pasture will not eat crofton weed.

It's untrue that Crofton weed only damages horses when it's in flower.

TRUE

It's true that some horses will seek out Crofton weed even when on otherwise good pasture or hard feed.

It's true that Crofton weed contains an addictive alkaloid. Crush a few leaves, stem and root to smell the carrot-like odour.

It's true that Crofton weed is harmful to horses that ingest it at all stages of the plant's growth, though it is thought to be at its most toxic immediately after flowering.

It's true that every mouthful causes damage.



Control

Crofton weed spreads rapidly and can produce as many as 60,000 viable seeds per square metre. The most effective way of controlling this weed is by slashing and mowing, followed by herbicide treatments. The job can be done manually, but it is important to get the underground crown dug-up and removed completely. A functional biological control agent has not yet been found for Crofton weed, besides the fact that goats are known to eat, and not be poisoned by the weed.

Regular slashing will reduce flowering and seedset, reduce the spread by seeds and the density of the plant. The slashed and dried plant, however, is still attractive and toxic to horses.

Take care to keep horses away until the plant has been completely removed from the paddock. After slashing, the weed is allowed to regrow from the crown to a height of 15–40 cm and then sprayed with herbicide. Chemical control appears to work best during late summer and autumn when weeds are actively growing.

Working horses

Do not work horses that have had access to the plant and are coughing or breathless, and it is suggested they should be thoroughly checked out by a veterinarian.

Any exertion increases the possibility of damaging the horse's lungs or the bronchial tubes.



Above: Crofton Weed in flower.

Below: Close-up of the triangle leaf of the Crofton weed plant.



USEFUL HERBS FOR HORSES that are slightly affected by Crofton Weed

ELECAMPANE (*Inula helenium*) - this is my favourite expectorant (lung dredger), it is also bronchial-spasmolytic, which means it is specific to treat bronchial asthma and cough.

LIQUORICE (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) root – not to be confused with the commercial liquorice candy. Liquorice extract is a bronchial vasodilator giving more expandability to airways. It works synergistically (together) with Elecampane, a soothing herb to treat bronchial asthma and cough.

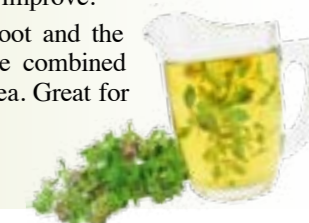
THYME (*Thymus vulgaris*) – one of the best antibacterial, anti-microbial, antifungal herbs for the upper respiratory tract for coughs, sore throat and asthma.

Ask your qualified herbal practitioner to combine all three ... concentrated high-grade extracts only ... this is the medicinal form to give best results should your horse be slightly affected. Any airways disease will be improved by dosing with ginger and thyme tea.

GINGER TEA – good for upset or underactive gut, bloat and travel sickness, plus its scientifically proven to be effective against the common cold. Use the **fresh root only** (source from greengrocers or supermarket). Finely chop 2-3cm – add two cups of boiling water – let cool then pour entire contents over feed. Do this once daily, or a few times a week, depending on the condition of your horse.

THYME TEA – brilliant herb for the entire upper respiratory tract - coughs, colds and sore throats. Ideally, use 5-10 sprigs of the fresh herb or two teaspoons of dried. Add to two cups of boiling water – let cool then pour entire contents over feed. You can give this 2-3 times daily, reducing the dose as symptoms improve.

The ginger root and the thyme can be combined in the same tea. Great for humans too!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Angela Davison, The Horse Herbalist.

Angela pioneered Classical Herbal Medicine for Horses in the 1980s, she has been working, teaching and learning in the field ever since. With a wealth of experience behind her Angela created her unique Hair Assessment system in the 90s which forms the foundation of her work in healing horses.

Author of Flower Remedies for Horses, Pets and People, Angela is a qualified Medical Herbalist, an Equine Herbal Specialist and Fellow of the Australian Traditional Medicine Society.

Find out more at thehorseherbalist.com



Author's note:

I learnt about Crofton weed the hard way. Over 30 years ago my partner and I purchased a bush block in northern New South Wales. This was before information was readily available at your fingertips via computers. On checking out the varying herbage I was

told by several local horse people that horses only ate this weed if they hadn't any other source of fodder. Wrong. We lost a wonderful, spunky mare with an enormous will to live. She searched for Crofton after becoming addicted to the alkaloid. Our two other horses didn't touch it. I was horrified at how little was known and the

dis-information I was given plus the veterinary treatment of antibiotics was inappropriate. My research into this insidious weed started then and has continued. The more information made available to horse owners the more chance they have of protecting their horses.



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