

Poke Salett

Pokeweed looms in many pastures. Know the dangers of this poisonous plant.

By Jeanie Long

Buffy Lee never dreamed her pasture was lethal.

The fencing seemed safe. There was no dangerous equipment lying around. Every day, she fed and checked on her horses, and all seemed pretty normal. Pokeweed is hardy and can even grow through cracked concrete. But there was one thing that wasn't quite right. "Red," Buffy's 2-year-old Quarter Horse gelding, despite proper care, was unable to maintain good body condition.

"When he was around 18 months old, Red's weight began to fluctuate greatly," Buffy recalls. She adjusted his feed and de-wormed him, but nothing helped.

In July 2003, Buffy noticed Red was unusually lethargic, spending all of his time leaning on the fence half asleep or lying down. He began losing more weight and plodded around the pasture, not even breaking into a trot.

"He began to resemble a rescue horse," Buffy recalls. "I could see his hip bones plainly and count his ribs. People who didn't have horses could tell Red's condition was bad. I was really afraid someone would take him away."

Terrified by Red's complete lack of muscle and fat, Buffy asked a veterinarian to examine the gelding. The veterinarian gave the gelding a steroid shot, never suspecting plant poisoning.

Buffy, who lives in Yulee, Florida, just north of Jacksonville, knew her pasture was overgrown with weeds, but she never realized there were poisonous plants creeping along with the grasses.

Close Call

Red began to slowly recover then hit rock bottom again in September 2003. On September 15, he went down with a bad case of colic.

Frantically calling veterinarians in the area, Buffy realized she did not have much time. Desperate and determined to save her young gelding, Buffy was finally able to get a friend to trailer the horse to the University of

Florida College of Veterinary Medicine in Gainesville.

“When we got there, they told me he only had two hours left [to live], if I hadn’t brought him in,” Buffy says.

The team of assisting veterinarians began pumping Red’s stomach. According to Buffy, the surgeon said the fluids from Red’s stomach smelled like poison.

Toxic Overload

Buffy first worried that someone had been poisoning her horse. Then, one neighbor suggested checking the pastures for toxic weeds.

Determined to get to root of the matter, Buffy researched poisonous weeds and even identified the weed she saw Red eating out in the pasture.

The weed that had poisoned Red: pokeweed.

“I saw him eating it constantly, but I didn’t think anything of it,” Buffy recalls. “I kept feeding him hay and feed, but the pokeweed was the only thing in the pasture. He must have acquired a preference for the bitter-tasting weed.” Buffy Lee and “Red,” on his way to full recovery after his pokeweed poisoning.

While Red was recovering at the university, Buffy took to the pastures to kill the toxic weeds. She was overwhelmed by the amount of pokeweed in Red’s pasture, so she fixed a paddock for Red to stay in until she could eliminate the weeds.

Finding Hope

Once Red came home from the hospital, Buffy was faced with the challenge of finding a feed that could nurse him back to health. Again, seeking advice from friends and neighbors, she found out about Seminole Feed and called the company’s toll-free nutrition helpline.

“I was very impressed when I called the company,” Buffy says. A Seminole equine nutritionist made feeding suggestions for Red and also gave Buffy directions to a feed store in her area.

By the middle of November 2003, Buffy was providing a premium Seminole Feed product, twice a day. Buffy was hoping Red would recover and gain the weight he had lost, but she expected his growth to be stunted.

After a few weeks on his new feeding program, Red began to grow and fill out. Buffy could hardly contain her excitement when she had to buy Red a new winter blanket, four sizes bigger than his previous blanket.

Now as a 4-year-old, Red enjoys running and playing in his weed-free paddock. He currently thrives on a diet of Gold Chance 12, timothy and alfalfa cubes and coastal hay. Buffy is pleased with Red's performance and growth with Seminole Feed. According to her, Red towers over horses that were once twice his size.

"I tell everyone about the dangers of not knowing what your horse is feeding himself and about the great people at Seminole who will help you fill the nutritional needs of your horse," Buffy says.