

Stringhalt in New Zealand

(For those who don't get the Horse Trader)

Since the drought has well and truly broken, hopefully this plant isn't as dangerous as it was a month or so ago. However, as mycotoxins proliferate within hours of the right conditions it pays to be aware. So check out those little yellow flowers, comparing the undersides of the flowers is the most reliable way to tell Cats Ear from Dandelion.

Watch out for 'Cats Ear', (alias 'Flatweed' or 'False Dandelion')

Whatever you call it you need to know about it if you own horses! It is a very common weed that we don't normally take much notice of! Easily confused with dandelion which is harmless.

Cats Ear is very drought tolerant and very palatable to horses. In fact it rapidly spreads under drought conditions. Point # 1 is that it is a myth that horses won't eat things that are poisonous to them. It is all about palatability. Some plants are poisonous and unpalatable, some are poisonous and very palatable.

The Cats Ear also harbours invisible fungi which produce neuro-toxic mycotoxins causing severe damage to the long nerves which control the hind-limbs. The resulting high-stepping or 'goose-stepping' is known as 'Australian Stringhalt'. Other complications involving respiration may also be present. One lady's horse would have 'attacks' in which the horse had great difficulty breathing and would collapse with eye-balls rolling around. Extremely distressing for horse and rider.

This year the drought conditions have stressed plants like rye-grass and Cats Ear badly so that when rain finally falls, the myco-toxins rapidly proliferate. Many horses have been afflicted this year because we were blissfully unaware of the consequences.

It is **absolutely essential** to remove the horse from the offending pasture **immediately** as damage to the nerves can be irreversible. At the very least it can require a very lengthy recovery period, anywhere from 3 months to 3 years.

An owner from Wellington whose horse had severe symptoms back in February is going to write her story for us, fortunately her horse has improved significantly but is still not back to normal.

I would love to hear from anyone else whose horse has been affected this year.

How do you tell the Difference Between 'Cats Ear' and True Dandelion?

Sometimes requires close inspection!



'Cats Ear'



'Dandelion'

Stems: Cats Ear stems are thin, wiry, sometimes grooved, branching so multiple flowers per stem
Dandelion stems are thick, milky, fuzzy, non-branching so ONE flower per stem

Flowers: Look underneath, the Cats Ear green petal-like bracts that support the flower from below stay tight to the flower.

The same bracts under the Dandelion flower fold back and down.

Leaves: Catsear leaves have many variations, have more regular not so deep scallops, can be smooth or Furry

Dandelion as in the picture have deeper scallops which slope backwards.

The Cats Ear can be grubbed out if there aren't too many, otherwise use a good broad-leaf spray. It is crucial not to let your horse eat these plants.

There are far more plants and grasses in New Zealand that are poisonous to horses than I for one thought!!

Help is Available

Fortunately for us all, Dr Deb Bennett PhD has spent the last year putting together a book (which is in CD Rom form to accommodate the large number of photographs) "Poisonous Plants in the Pasture, A Horse Owner's Guide" which is nothing short of brilliant for being able to look up various plants and/or grasses and tell them apart. Many poisonous plants have close look-alikes!! You need to be able to accurately identify which ones are of concern and which are not so you don't either waste money getting rid of something which is really OK or miss something which is seriously poisonous under certain conditions as with the Cats Ear in New Zealand this year.