

Fiddleneck. Weeds or Wild Flowers. It Depends!

By Diane Miller

Fiddleneck (genus *Amsinckia*), has a distinct curled stem adorned with bright five-part orange or yellow flowers. It is the only member of the borage family with orange flowers. Also, in the borage family are forget-me-nots, which are toxic as well.



These flowers look so colorful on hillsides but are very toxic. They contain pyrrolizidine alkaloids which are hepatotoxic (poison to the liver) in horses, cattle and pigs when the brackets and flowers are eaten. These very poisonous plants bloom in the early spring, and by the time you see the flowers, they have set their seeds for next year's growth and are poisonous.

The seed, according to University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources, contains the toxic pyrrolizidine alkaloids that affect the livers of cattle, horses and pigs. The flowers and bracken are also linked to cancers (the young fronds are considered a delicacy in Japan). Eating this plant is very dangerous and not recommended. Sheep are more resistant to this toxin and they are known to chew the base of the stalk, helping keep the plants at bay in many fields.

The name of the fiddleneck is spot on as it looks like its namesake: the neck of a fiddle. It is curled over itself, with the orange yellow flower from this stem. It is an annual plant emerging in the early spring, blooming in March through June. It is a native in California and this native can reach 3-4 feet tall. They are single stemmed with a lance-shaped leaf that alternates with one another on the stem. The leaves are coarse to touch and hairy (UCANR). This plant grows well in disturbed soil and is invasive in abandoned crop lands and neglected pastures.

It may look beautiful, bright and colorful on hillsides, along trails and meadows but this wild flower or weed is extremely toxic to our cattle and horses. It may lurk in contaminated alfalfa hay bales or be eaten while animals are in a pasture. The least sensitive animals to this toxin are goats and turkeys. The older animals are less sensitive to the toxins than the younger animals.

So, to recap, since fiddleneck is a native and toxic there are limited control options. You can consider mowing, burning or perhaps goat grazing to eradicate this in your pastures to protect your grazing animals or enjoy it on the hillsides in California. Again, it depends on what you call this plant, flower or weed!

For more information about the fiddleneck go to UC Integrated Pest Management, here is the link: <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/WEEDS/fiddlenecks.html>

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