Poison plants of Western Australia: Ironwood

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IRONWOOD

Erythrophloeum chlorostachys (F. Muell.)

The genus Erythrophloeum comprises five species, native to Africa, China and Northern Australia. At least three of these are known to be poisonous, including E. guineense which was used as an ordeal and arrow poison by the natives of West Africa. The South African species, also, is known to be poisonous to stock.

The single Australian species E. chlorostachys is a tree that is native to the tropical areas. It is common throughout the Kimberleys and as far south as the De Grey River. It occurs in the sandy soils of the open plains or in the quartzite and sandy regions, and may grow to a height of 30 to 40 ft.

The tree has widely-spread, leafy branches and the trunk may be 10 to 15 ft. tall and 12 to 8 in. in diameter with dark grey, or almost black, bark that is fissured or more or less tesselated and rough.

The timber is very hard, close-grained and heavy—hence the common name of "Ironwood"—and is reddish-brown or dark brown in colour.

The tree is sometimes known as "Camel Poison" also as "Black Bean Tree" because the pods remain on the tree long after the seeds have fallen.

The leaves are large and twice divided, the leaflets being roundish and rich green in colour, especially when young, but becoming leathery in age. The flowers are pale yellow, and borne in cylindrical spikes like those of many wattles.

Although species of Erythrophloeum have for many years been known to be highly poisonous there seems to be little definite information available regarding the effects produced in the animals poisoned, or of the amounts which must be eaten to cause death.

With regard to E. chlorostachys it is stated by Herbert (1921) that all parts of the plant are exceedingly poisonous—the wood, bark, the yellowish sap, leaves, flowers and pods. The leaves are not palatable to stock, generally, but camels eat them readily, with fatal results. In this State, camels only have been reported to be poisoned, but in Queensland and in Northern Territory, large numbers of cattle have died as a result of eating the leaves during periods of drought or when travelling. It has been stated, also, that donkeys, horses and sheep are sometimes poisoned.

The poisonous alkaloid, Erythrophleine, isolated from the African species E. guineense, also occurs in the local species E. chlorostachys. Erythrophleine has been shown to have an action similar to digitalis, which is used medicinally, particularly as a tonic in chronic heart disease.

Investigations carried out in Central Australia in 1947 and 1948, and reported by Rose (1954), showed conclusively that mortalities in travelling cattle on the Mur-
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Erythrophloeum chlorostachys (F. Muell).
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ranji stock route were due to poisoning with *E. chlorostachys*. Feeding tests showed that the leaves were highly toxic to cattle and horses. The leaves were unpalatable, but it was found that amounts of about 2 oz. eaten with the feed or given as a watery infusion of leaves, were sufficient to kill both cattle and horses.

The symptoms and post mortem appearances in the two experimental cattle were identical with those observed in natural cases of poisoning; two experimental horses showed similar signs. The symptoms shown were profuse scouring, depression, and a peculiar sunken appearance of the eyes which seems to be characteristic. In experimental cases death occurred within about 24 hours; cattle poisoned under natural conditions may sometimes recover within a week or two, but only after great loss in bodily condition. On post-mortem examination the only notable features are inflammation of the fourth stomach, and sometimes of the intestines.

**REFERENCES**


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