



Loco weed is a common name for certain toxic plants in the pea family (Fabaceae), mainly in the genera *Astragalus* (milk vetch) and *Oxytropis* (crazyweed). Accurate ID is important because chronic ingestion can cause “locoism” in livestock.

Appearance and growth:

Growth form: Low growing perennial herbs, usually in tufts or bushy clumps, 8–30 cm (3–12 in) tall.

Leaves: Pinnately compound (leaflets on either side of a central stalk). Often gray green and hairy/woolly, especially in woolly locoweed (*Astragalus mollissimus*).

Flowers: Sweet pea like, in spikes or clusters. Colors vary by species — white, cream, purple, blue, or yellow.

Astragalus: keel petal is blunt.

Oxytropis: keel petal is pointed/short beaked.

Fruit: Erect, stalkless legume pods, often enlarged, containing kidney shaped brown seeds that may rattle in dried pods.

Seeds: Can remain viable in soil for decades.

Habitat & Distribution

Found in prairies, rangelands, foothills, mountains, and deserts of the western and north central U.S., including Colorado.

Often the first green plants in spring and remain palatable when other forage is dormant.

Toxicity Note

Only some species produce swainsonine, an alkaloid made by a symbiotic fungus (*Undifilum oxytropis*) inside the plant. This toxin is not visible to the naked eye, so toxicity cannot be confirmed by appearance alone — identification should be combined with expert or lab verification.

In summary: Loco weed is a low, tufted, hairy leafed pea family plant with pea like flowers and kidney shaped seeds, found in western North American rangelands. Use both morphological traits and expert verification to avoid misidentifying toxic species.

How It Affects Livestock

Horses, cattle, sheep, goats, and wildlife (elk, deer, antelope) are poisoned by eating locoweed. Signs of poisoning appear after 2 to 3 weeks of continuous grazing on the plant. Locoweed has four principal effects on livestock. These are: (1) neurological damage; (2) emaciation; (3) reproductive dysfunction and abortion; and (4) congestive right heart failure when grazed at high elevations.

Signs and Lesions of Poisoning

Depression, Dull dry hair coat, Eyes dull and staring, Irregular gait or some loss of muscular control, Weakness, Some animals show extreme nervousness, Loss of sense of direction, Withdrawal from other animals, Some animals develop inability to eat or drink, Abortions are common; hydrops may occur in some cattle, Skeletal malformations may occur, Animal may become violent if stressed, Reduced libido in males and altered estrous behavior in females, Recumbency and death may follow prolonged consumption of locoweed. Vacuolation of neurons, renal tubular epithelium, hepatocytes, etc. Congestive heart failure when grazed at high elevations.

How to manage it:

Pull plant before it seeds

Herbicide is effective

How to Reduce Losses Restrict access to locoweed during critical periods when the plant is more palatable than associated forages. Maintain conservative stocking rates to avoid forcing animals to consume locoweed when desirable forage becomes limited. Remove animals that begin eating locoweed to prevent intoxication and to keep them from influencing others to start eating locoweed. No treatments have been identified that are effective in reversing or minimizing locoweed poisoning.