Apples Good, Thistles Bad
Maybe, Maybe Not.

Not only can we train livestock to eat thistles but they can also become a preferred food. Bob Welling, Research Support Manager at Ridley Block, found an old campground in the Bob Marshall Wilderness in Montana infested with Canadian thistle. His horses searched out the thistles and ate them to the ground. They also select thistle rosettes in the fall. Apparently, they’ll eat most any thistle. Below is a photo of Bob’s son, Owen, bribing their horse, Helpful, with a native thistle treat.

Some horses may prefer thistles but what about apples? A few weeks ago, Michael Hall wrote he was driving through the Chihuahuan desert near the Texas-Mexico border. He saw a small band of ranch horses in a big pasture along the road. He stopped, split an apple and offered it to the horses but none of them would even give it a nibble.

Michael went on to say, “It was a completely novel food to them. … I would bet the farm (or ranch) that the group had never been offered an apple. You can see the group was accepting of a stranger, but I had no takers on the strange food (photo above). As Fred said in that first NRCS training session, "If I hadn't believed it, I wouldn't have seen it."

I had a dog that grew up in a run with an apple tree. He loved apples and carrots as well. Whenever I brought apples or carrots for my horses, he was right there begging for his share.

Horses that love thistles, dogs that love apples and horses that won’t eat apples, it all depends on experience.

By the way, Bob Welling’s thistle eating horses won’t eat apples.
Since 2007, Kathy Voth has worked with Boulder County Parks and Open Space and local ranchers to train a herd of 50 cows and their offspring to eat late-season diffuse knapweed and Dalmatian toadflax. This year the cows taught her what cows trained to be open-minded about foods can do.

The herd grazed with 38 untrained cow-calf pairs in a 500-acre pasture, near Boulder, CO. June and July 2009 were two of the wettest months on record. Grasses rebounded and forbs, many of them weeds, went wild. A large prairie dog ghost town, vacant due to plague, which covered about 200 acres of the pasture was covered with weeds and grassless. The area looked so bad compared to our traditional view of good forage that Kathy nicknamed it the “garbage area.”

Apparently, it didn’t look so bad to the cows. They avoided the grassy areas and spent their time in the “garbage area” snipping off sunflower blossoms, yucca fruits, and musk thistle flowers and eating prickly lettuce and bindweed. When they came to grassy areas of blue grama, big bluestem, western wheatgrass and brome, cows grabbed a few bites then quickly moved on to graze prostrate pigweed, Russian thistle cutleaf nightshade and fetid marigold. They dined on common ragweed, wormwood sagewort, wild licorice, chinopodiurns, Missouri goldenrod, and more.

Kathy collected samples of the plants and plant parts cattle were eating and avoiding. Protein values for their preferred weeds ranged from 12 to 22%. Since animals often choose forage based on its nutritional value, it makes sense that cows ate little grass since it ranged from 3 to 8% protein.

In past years, untrained cows focused on eating the grasses and avoided the weeds. This project shows us what “open-minded” cows can do, both choosing to eat weeds and training their herd mates, and that grass may not always be a cow’s first, or BEST choice.

For more info on this project visit: livestockforlandscapes.com/GLCl.htm