

WHY IS IT A WEED?

It's a competitor of gardens and crops

WHERE IS IT FOUND?

All across New Zealand

IS IT TOXIC?

Yes, but not as bad as you might think

BLACK NIGHTSHADE

I'VE BEEN WORKING to help my junior agronomists identify families of plants. Often you will come across a weed in the paddock that you just aren't sure of, but if you can identify the family then you will have a pretty good idea on how to control it.

I gave them a pretty ubiquitous weed – black nightshade – and asked them to figure out what it was related to in the garden. They made their father proud when they informed me that it looked like the potatoes and the tomatoes in the garden. Right on kids!

Black nightshade (*Solanum nigrum*) is a common weed found almost everywhere in New Zealand. Originally native to Europe and Asia, black nightshade has spread to North and South America, Australasia and Africa. It is a member of the large Solanaceae family of plants and notable members include the nightshades: potatoes, tomatoes, tobaccos, capsicums, and even the aubergines (or eggplants).

Many species of plants within this family have important uses as foods, spices and medicines, but black nightshade isn't one of them. The leaves and the unripe berries contain some nasty compounds that could get you sick if eaten. But amazingly, despite this, black nightshade is used as a food source in

some parts of the world where the ripe berries are made into jams, included in soups and stews, and the leaves are cooked and eaten as a vegetable.

Black nightshade is easily recognisable in the garden, paddock or crop. It is a tall, upright plant. The leaves are broad in the middle and narrow to a tip at the end. The leaves and stem can sometimes get a quite vivid purple tinge to them. It produces a simple white flower (sometimes

with a purple tinge) with a protruding yellow middle, which develops into a small bunch of green berries that ripen into a glossy deep black colour.

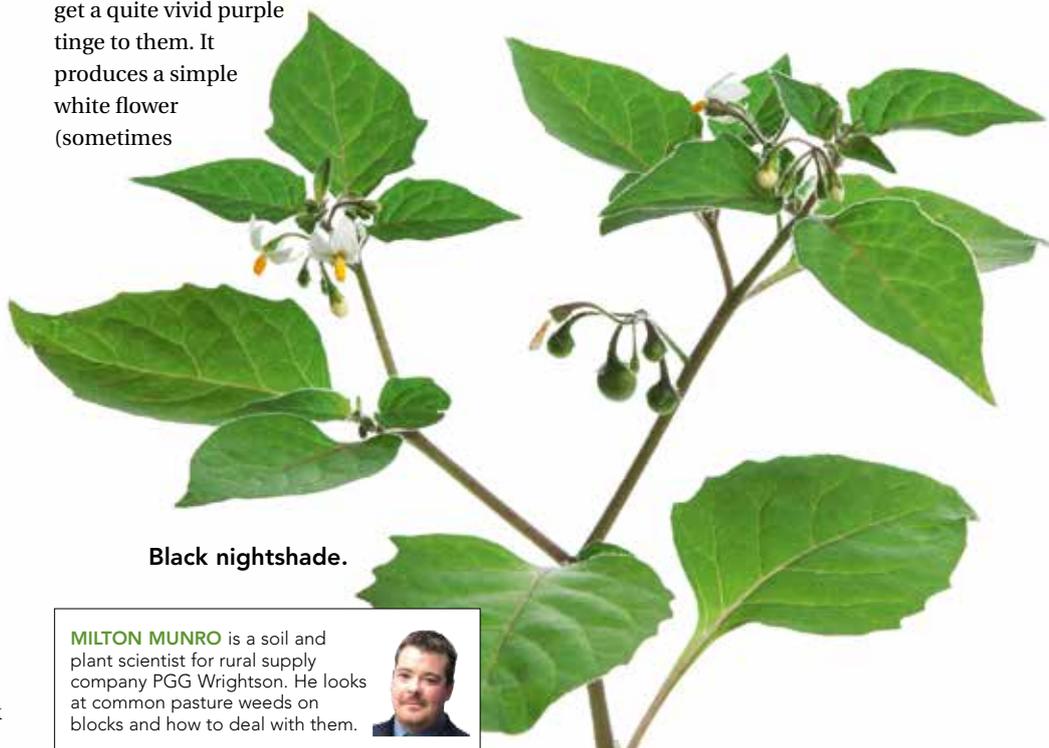
It tends to germinate in the spring, flower in the summer and then die off in the autumn with the frosts.

HOW TO CONTROL IT

In a garden situation, it is an easy weed to remove by hand, but if you have a large infestation of black nightshade, control can be difficult as it is resistant to a lot of the chemistry commonly available.

In a pasture situation, there are a few products:

- if the nightshade is very small (2-4 leaves), use a product like Tropotox Plus at 4L/ha.
- if the nightshade is larger, then products like MCPA (1.5L/ha) or 2-4D (1.5L/ha) can be used but expect to see some major clover suppression.
- if nightshade is present in other crops, it is best to seek some professional advice to find the right chemical to kill the weed but not the crop. ■



Black nightshade.

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