

Chick Weed *Stellaria media*

MILTON MUNRO



I spend a bit of time in my vege garden over summer. I love the sense of satisfaction in growing your own vegetables and thumbing your nose to the supermarkets.

Being a weed fanatic, I'm always picking weeds and identifying them and driving my poor wife up the wall with continual comments, tests and interesting weed facts.

No matter where I am, I can always count on finding one particular weed in every vege garden I come across: chickweed. I can be looking at a garden in Whangarei one day and harvesting some courgettes out of my own garden in Invercargill the next and it's still chickweed staring me in the eye, daring me to pull it out.

Chickweed (*Stellaria media*) is very common and is found in gardens, pastures, crops and wastelands - in fact almost everywhere - across the entire country. It is a native of Europe and was probably introduced to New Zealand by the early settlers who prized chickweed for its herbal properties and its use as a cheap vegetable.

Chickweed gets its name because it is a prized food of chickens and other birds which will aggressively seek it out in paddocks and gardens. It is also used a lot by herbalists as a soothing cure for inflammation or skin irritations. Raw chickweed is quite edible for humans too, with a very "green" taste like a really strong lettuce. It makes a nice addition to a salad and is a commonly used green in a lot of Asian dishes. It also makes an awesome substitute for basil in a traditional pesto - I have a recipe if anyone wants it.

The lifecycle of chickweed is pretty straightforward. It usually germinates in bare patches of soil in late autumn or

Ferum ipsam quae.
Et intotatqui non nis
nulless inulparum alis
in consequam quam,



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winter. It is a winter active plant with only hard frosts stopping its growth. In spring the growth explodes and plants produce many soft, thin, low-growing stems that rapidly colonise large areas. The leaves are light green, smooth and oval with a pointed tip, and they grow as pairs on opposite sides along the stem. If you look carefully at the stem you will see a fine line of hairs growing along it - this is a really good way to tell that it's chickweed.

From September to February the plant produces an enormous number of small (1cm across) white flowers. These flowers appear to have 10 petals but they actually have five deeply divided petals.

Plants go to seeds very rapidly and these are dispersed easily. An individual chickweed plant can produce up to 2500 seeds which equates to millions of seeds

per hectare. The colonisation of a garden or paddock can occur quickly!

HOW TO CONTROL CHICKWEED

This can be easy or hard depending on where it is growing. In your vege garden it is easily controlled by manual methods. Cultivation or hand pulling are really effective as the plant stems are weak and easily damaged.

But if chickweed turns up in a crop or pasture it becomes harder to control. It is somewhat resistant to a lot of the standard chemicals we would normally use for broadleaf weed control. The best products to use contain sulfonyleurea. *Preside* will control chickweed all the way up to just before flowering and is clover safe, but remember the bigger the weed the more *Preside* you should use. Always check the label before use.

MILTON MUNRO is a soil and plant scientist for rural supply company PGG Wrightson. He looks at common pasture weeds you'll find on your block and how to deal with them.

DO YOU NEED HELP WITH A WEED PROBLEM?

If anyone has a request for a particular weed they would like to know more about please don't hesitate to let Milton know: mmunro@pggwrightson.co.nz