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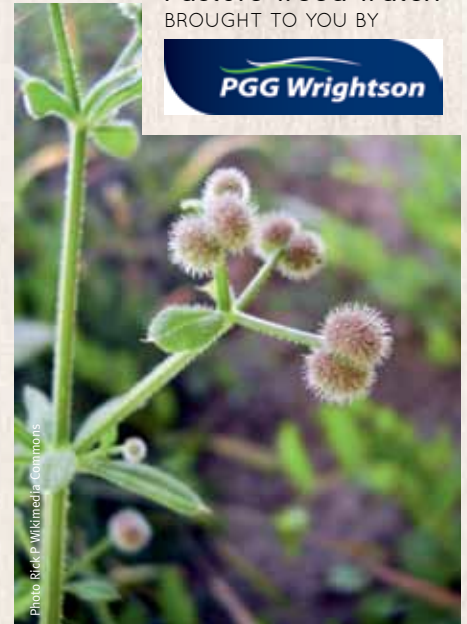


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# CLEAVERS GALIUM APARINE

MILTON MUNRO



I'm writing this column in a motel room in Murchison. One of my colleagues and I have just finished the first day of a two day training program with our staff and one of the many activities we got the team to do was to try and identify some weeds simply by looking at the type of seeds they produced. This turned out to be a pretty difficult job!

But there was one weed seed everyone could identify. It was a seed that everyone has had some experience of pulling out of their woollen socks or out of the fur of the cat or dog. This seed belongs to the weed known as cleavers, an annual weed that can be found in most parts of New Zealand. Cleavers are a common weed found all over the world - especially in Europe and North America - and belong to the Rubiaceae family, otherwise known as the coffee family.

One really interesting fact about cleavers: they were once widely used in Europe to stuff mattresses. Apparently the hooks on cleavers would allow for a uniform thickness when stuffing the mattress and it's in light of this that I now understand why in some parts of the world the Rubiaceae family of plants is also

**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.**

The 'sticky' seed is actually covered in tiny hooks.

known as the "bedstraw" family.

Cleavers start their annual lifecycle usually in the autumn and are vegetative throughout the winter. The simple narrow leaves of cleavers grow in a whorl around the stem, with 6-8 leaves in each whorl. The stems themselves can be quite long (up to 1m) and tend to be square. During spring they produce 2-3 small white star-shaped flowers just below each set

of whorled leaves and it's these flowers that produce the very distinctive 'sticky' seed.

This seed - and indeed most of the cleavers' foliage - is covered in a series of tiny hooks. These hooks can give the feeling that the

plant is actually quite sticky although this is not the case. The hooks on the leaves and stem enable it to climb up other plants and in some cases cause them to lodge and fall over. The hooks on the seeds are there to aid in seed dispersion and easily end up in the fur of animals or the socks or pants of people walking past.

## CONTROLLING CLEAVERS

The control of cleavers will depend entirely on where you find it on the farm. In the case of the home garden, cleavers are easily controlled by simply pulling them out of the ground. Unlike some of the weeds we have discussed before, this method of control is pretty effective because cleavers tend to have very weak stems and very shallow root systems.

If you do need to look at a chemical option you may need to

do some homework as a lot of usual herbicides have little effect on cleavers. Glyphosate can be used for non-selective control, while products containing the chemical ingredient mecoprop can give good selective control. If you are unsure, just ask your local PGG Wrightson Technical Field Representative for help.

## EATING CLEAVERS

Cleavers are an edible weed. The leaves and stems are apparently quite palatable but they need to be harvested before the seed head develops. Due to the small hooks that cover cleavers, apparently it's best to cook them before eating.

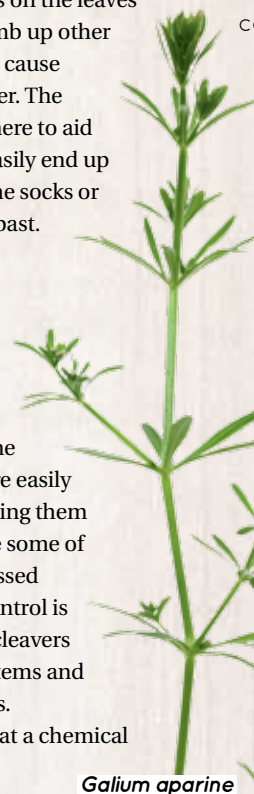
Those sticky annoying seeds can also be used as a low caffeine coffee substitute.

Hmmmm - not sure if they will be high on my list of things to try but let me know if you've ever given them a go!

## HOW TO MAKE CLEAVERS 'COFFEE'

- Collect cleaver seeds when they are ripe (coloured black, late spring - summer), place in a bowl and wash in cold water, then drain.
- Spread in a shallow baking dish and bake at 180°C until dry and slightly roasted. Cool before grinding.
- To get a decent flavour you need about 3 heaped tablespoons of dried, ground seeds for 2 cups of water.

Source: [www.everygreenherb.com](http://www.everygreenherb.com)



Galium aparine