



OXALIS

Why is it a weed? Highly invasive plant pest that is very difficult to control.

Where is it found? Across New Zealand, in gardens, paddocks and lawns.

Is it toxic? Not really - oxalis does contain oxalic acid which in high doses can be toxic but you would need to eat a serious amount to get sick!

Alternative uses? Some species are edible and some others are sold as ornamental plants.



MILTON MUNRO

I love hearing from readers. It feeds my all-consuming ego and reinforces my high level of self-importance, so thanks everyone, please keep feeding the beast! One recent email was from Ann who was having some difficulty with a nasty problem weed. This weed looked a bit like a four leaf clover, had small bulbs and kept coming back no matter how often it was cut, pulled or sprayed.

Commiserations Ann. You have a member of the Oxalis family, the bane of the home gardener.

When we talk about 'oxalis' we are usually referring to one of the 800 different species that make up the Oxalis family. This very successful family of plants has managed to spread right around the globe, the only exceptions being the polar areas. Members of the Oxalis family can be found all over New Zealand, and notable members found in New Zealand include creeping oxalis (*Oxalis exilis*, a native to New Zealand), horned oxalis (*Oxalis corniculata*), and sourgrass (*Oxalis articulata*).

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.

Then there is my favourite, *Oxalis tuberosa* or the humble New Zealand yam. Roast yams are the bestest of all roast vegetables but I will never ever plant them in my garden again. Two seasons was all it took to dominate the garden bed and ruin it for all my other veges.

As you may have guessed, most members of the Oxalis family are edible but there are varying degrees of edibility. All members of the Oxalis family produce oxalates which are toxic to humans and animals, and also give the plants a sour taste that can deter grazing. Fortunately, to actually reach a toxic level of oxalates you would need to eat an awful lot of oxalis, which may explain the upset stomach for one of my children after he ate his bodyweight in roast yams.

Even though we are dealing with over 800 different species of oxalis, they share many similar qualities that make them easy to identify. They all produce pale green, clover-like leaves (most have three leaves in the cluster but some have four). These leaves have a distinctive notch out of the end of the leaf which gives them a love heart-like appearance. They form quite bushy rosettes and can overtake an area quite quickly. The flowers always have five petals and are usually red, pink, yellow or white.

What's really interesting about oxalis is that some species reproduce by producing bulbs and these bulbs are notoriously hard to remove from the ground. Creeping oxalis doesn't produce bulbs but it does produce a long fragile stolon that is just as tricky to remove as a bulb.

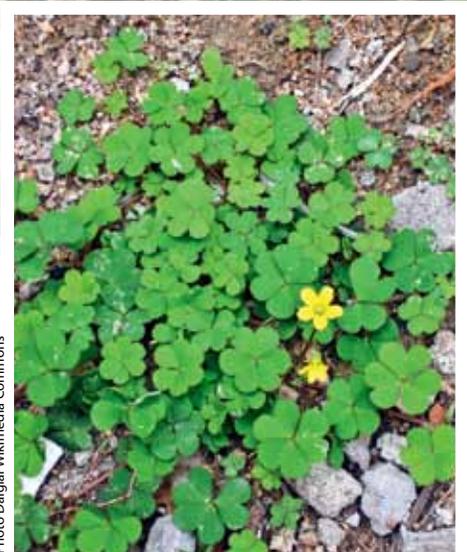


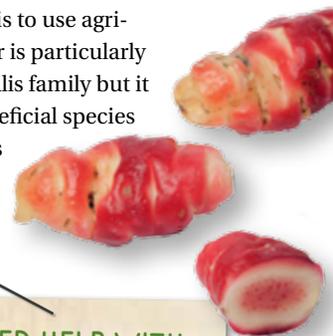
Photo Dalgjal Wikimedia Commons

How to control oxalis

It has been alluded to a few times but I better stress it again: controlling oxalis is not easy. When it's pulled out of the ground it releases the parent bulb and any daughter bulbs that it has made so pulling it effectively spreads it around, even worse than if you'd left it be.

You can exhaust the bulbs' energy stores by removing the leaves, either by cutting them off or burning them off with glyphosate every time they appear but this is a particularly intensive process.

The final option is to use agri-chemicals. Triclopyr is particularly effective on the Oxalis family but it will harm most beneficial species around the area it is sprayed on so be careful. ■



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