

SPURGE*

*Generally, if it's a weed in New Zealand it will be petty spurge or *Euphorbia peplus*

Why is it a weed?

It spreads quickly through gardens.

Where is it found?

Nationwide

Is it toxic?

Yes, it is both poisonous and a caustic irritant.

Alternative uses?

Some medicinal uses.



MILTON MUNRO

Readers have been asking me about heaps of interesting weeds. I've had queries on everything from barley grass and miner's lettuce to reeds and rushes.

Out of the multitude of emails, one weed in particular caught my eye. It was sent in by Andrea Miller of Te Awamutu (south-west of Hamilton).

This weed perplexed me for days. Even my go-to weed guru struggled with a definitive identification. That's because the weed in question is a member of the spurge family, one of the most diverse and bizarre in the plant world.

The term spurge refers to the family of weeds known as Euphorbia. This is an enormous family (over 2000 members) which ranges from beautiful poinsettias, to cactus-like types of the North and South American deserts, to the common weed varieties that Andrea has such as petty spurge (*Euphorbia peplus*).

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 spurge family is also one of the most diverse families of plants with a wide range of growth forms, sizes, flower shapes, colours etc. It's hard to believe that some of these plants are in the same family. This can also make it tricky to identify exactly which plant you have, my issue with my final identification of Andrea's weed. That's my story and I'm sticking to it!

The name spurge was derived from the the Old French term 'espurge' meaning 'to purge', and that is exactly what happens if you are unlucky enough to eat some. All members of the spurge family are toxic and induce a powerful laxative effect.

There is one more nasty characteristic that all members of the spurge family share. They produce a thick milky sap whenever they are wounded which acts as a deterrent to anything that grazes them.

The sap is a powerful irritant with caustic properties. Any contact with the eyes, nose or mouth of an animal produces an extremely painful inflammation. This inflammation can be strong enough to cause permanent blindness and hospitalisation. This is one weed you don't want to mess with! Interestingly enough, this caustic property is now being exploited in a new wave of skin cancer drugs. In some cases these topical creams can be used to burn off skin lesions before they become cancerous.

There is no general rule of thumb for identifying Spurge as all members look radically different. However it is easy to identify the most common form of spurge in New Zealand. Petty spurge (sometimes known as milkweed) is an annual weed that grows to around 30cm tall. The leaves are pale green and slightly oval in shape.

At the end of each leafy stem, three smaller stems (called umbels), are produced and at the end of these is a small green flower. When the plant is damaged it produces a thick milky sap.

How to control it

Spurge can be a tricky weed to control. Because of its diversity, different types of spurge respond to different chemicals differently. Glyphosate and Buster tend to do a good job but if the plants are mature and woody then rates will need to be increased. If you get onto spurge early it is easy to pull it out of gardens by hand – just remember about the toxic sap and use some gloves.

If you have any questions, queries or problems just drop me a line! ■