



STORKSBILL

Erodium sp.



MILTON MUNRO

Let me just state for the record that I love getting emails and letters from readers, and this column was inspired by a lovely note from Sheryn (check out her very cool website: www.corrugatedcreations.co.nz).

Sheryn has a lovely little block just north of Tirau in the Waikato, but it has been invaded by a new weed that has steadily and persistently been making itself quite at home. Sheryn was nice enough to send me some photos of the offending weed and I was able to quickly identify it as storksbill.

There are three different types found in New Zealand: storksbill (*Erodium cicutarium*), long storksbill (*Erodium botrys*) and musky storksbill (*Erodium moschatum*), the one that Sheryn has. All three of these weeds belong to the Geraniaceae family of weeds which contains (not surprisingly) the Geraniums, the Pelargoniums and the Erodiums.

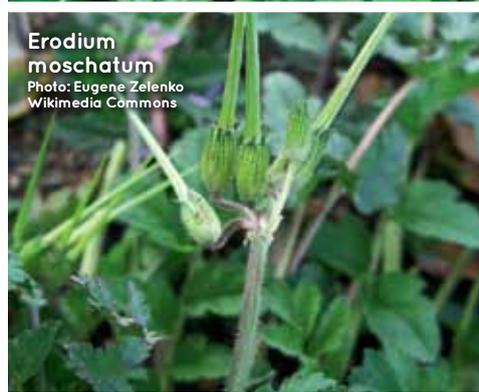
The Erodiums are native to the Mediterranean and Western Asia but are now found all over the world. In North America they are known as heronsbills and in Europe they are known as storksbills. The Erodiums get their bird-like name from the distinctive shape of their fruit which resembles a long bird beak, and in fact the name 'Erodium' is derived from the Greek word for heron (erodios).

All three varieties of storksbill are opportunistic weeds; if there is a bare patch of dirt they will pop up. They are often found in paddocks that are recovering from drought or have been beaten up a bit by stock.

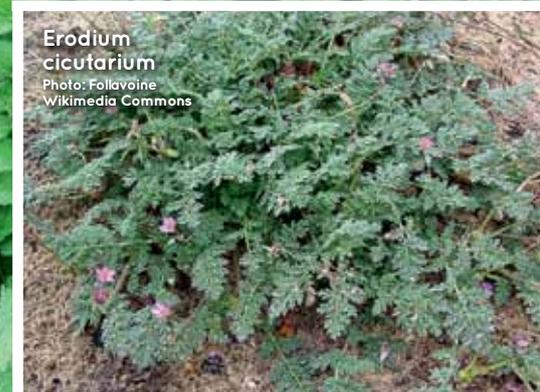
Storksbill varieties begin their lives in late summer/early autumn, germinating and then immediately form a rosette of leaves. At this stage it is possible to tell the three varieties of storksbill apart. Musky storksbill has quite large oval-shaped, highly lobed leaves, storksbill has a very fine fern-like leaf and long storksbill has a very hairy stem and leaf.



Erodium moschatum



Erodium moschatum
Photo: Eugene Zelenko
Wikimedia Commons



Erodium cicutarium
Photo: Follavoine
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At this stage the plant also begins to develop a quite long, thick and fibrous taproot that enables the plant to survive very dry conditions. In spring the storksbills produce stems with small purple/pink flowers, which later produce the distinctive seed heads that give the plants their name, with seeds developing a long spirally twisted awn (the bit that looks like a bird's beak). This spiral awn can wind and unwind and actually drill the seed into loose soil. Unfortunately it also tends to drill itself into other things too such as animal fur and skin.

There is also a question as to whether or not consumption of storksbill has a toxic effect on stock - there is some evidence to suggest that stock eating storksbill have shown increased photosensitivity - but the jury is still out.

CONTROLLING STORKSBILL

This is not an easy endeavour. If you get to it early enough it can be pulled out but once the taproot starts to get a few root hairs on it all you'll do is rip a few leaves off and it can regenerate from the root. Spraying is an option but you need to

be careful about your choice of product. In order to get any effect on Storksbill using 2,4D or MCPA you will need to use very high rates (2l/ha+) to get any effect and even then only on small plants. You could also spot spray plants with Tordon PastureBoss, although this is only effective on small plants.

Any of these options will cause damage to any clover plants you spray. ■

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