



Californian thistle

THIS MONTH'S WEED is a thorn in my side, particularly at certain times of the year.

Californian thistle occurs throughout most of NZ. This perennial has the ability to live indefinitely thanks to its strong, creeping root system. It produces foliage in the spring that becomes most dominant in late summer months, outcompeting pasture. It is native to Eurasia, but was first sighted in New Zealand in 1878.

A patch of Californian thistle in a paddock is one individual cloned plant, connected underground by spreading roots that grow horizontally through the soil. These also act as the food storage system that allows the plant to remain dormant through winter, then burst into life again in spring.

It can be a big pain to your animals. The seed heads can easily become lodged and contaminate wool. Sheep and deer are also prone to scabby mouth and abrasions to the skin and mouth caused by the spines of the thistle.

How to control it

The easiest herbicide control is glyphosate, which can be used anytime of the year but it also kills grass species.

For emerging thistles, MCPB is a good option if you want to retain clover and grass species.

Whatever you try, read the label, check Californian thistle is affected, and apply the correct active ingredient rates.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Why is it a weed?

Competes in your lawns, pastures and disturbed land

Where is it found?

Across New Zealand

Is it toxic?

No, but it can cause other health issues

2 organic ways to get rid of it

NZ Beef and Lamb studies show that mowing Californian thistles in the rain can cause a vascular wilt disease that kills it. There is a particular strategy and timing for mowing that works best, and full control will take a few years. Read more:

thisnzlife.co.nz/7-ways-fight-new-zealand-weeds-organically/

Biocontrol is also an option. NZ has an established weevil (*Rhinocyllus conicus*) and a beetle (*Cassida rubiginosa*) successfully feeding on Californian thistles.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Stephanie's tip

If you have a patch of Californian thistles, I urge you to control it. Every year this weed reduces the pasture availability for stock, with more than 75 per cent of farmers from the latest PGG Wrightson survey recording this thistle on their property.

Stephanie Sloan grew up on a sheep and beef farm in the Wairarapa. She is now part of PGG Wrightson's agronomy team, identifying weeds on a daily basis.

