

CATSEAR

I'M NOT SURE what sort of year you've had so far but down here in the south it has been pretty rough.

Now, I know what you're thinking: it's always rough down south. But that is only a fabrication to keep you all from moving to the promised land of Southland.

So far in 2016 it has been too wet and too cold, then too hot and too dry, but there is always a silver lining; when the season does funny things the usual weeds struggle and the weird ones come out which is exciting stuff for someone like me!

This month's weed is not a weird weed per say, but it is very weird to find it so prevalent in Southland pastures. I'm talking about catsear, a common weed that is often confused with quite similar-looking weeds (hawkbit, hawksbeard, and dandelion).

Catsear (*Hypochaeris radicata*) is a common weed found all over New Zealand. It's originally native to Europe but has spread to most of the western world, and is a member of the daisy family.

I can't talk about catsear without mentioning dandelion because in many cases the two plants are confused with each other. It's so common, one of the alternative names for catsear is false dandelion. Like dandelion, catsear is completely edible to people. You can try the leaves and the roots, although personally I find catsear to be a little tasteless – give me the earthy bitterness of dandelion any day.

HOW TO CONTROL IT

Controlling catsear is very dependent on where it is. If you have access to sheep they will eat it out of a paddock quick smart – they love it – but if you don't have access to the woolly heroes then it gets harder.

There are some herbicides that can be used (such as Versatil), but these need to be used pre-flowering and carry some major fishhooks such as clover damage.

The best method of control is to never let it get a foothold and we do this by ensuring we have the best performing competitive pasture. This means good fertility and not damaging the pasture during wet or dry times of the year.



WHY IS IT A WEED?

It's a competitive pest of lawns, pastures and perennial crops

WHERE IS IT FOUND?

All across New Zealand

IS IT TOXIC?

Not to humans, sheep or cattle, but can be to horses

ALTERNATIVE USES?

Quite edible

CATSEAR VS DANDELION

Identifying catsear can be a little tricky. It germinates in the spring and forms a ground-hugging rosette with slightly lobed leaves that are covered in fine hairs. Dandelion and hawksbeard look similar but don't have the hairs, and catsear leaves are much bigger.

Once the flowering stem emerges it becomes a little easier to identify. Catsear produces a solid stem with no leaves that forks to produce multiple yellow dandelion-esque flowers. Dandelion and hawkbit only produce a single unbranched stem and Hawksbeard produces a similar stem to catsear but it has leaves on it.

Dandelion
(*Taraxacum officinale*).



WARNING: TOXIC TO HORSES

One important point to raise about catsear is its potential toxicity to horses. Catsear has been linked (although not proven) to cases of stringhalt, a neurological issue in horses that causes the muscles in the rear legs to contract so excessively an affected animal can kick itself in the stomach.

I'm not the best person to provide animal health advice, especially about horses (they terrify me), but I would be very careful about allowing horses to graze in paddocks with high levels of catsear.

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