

BARLEY GRASS

I'VE BEEN BLESSED with a few emails from *NZ Lifestyle Block* readers over the last month. Keep them coming folks – my wife says I need them to feed my ravenous ego – as I'm only too happy to help out with any questions you have on weeds, fertiliser, agri-chemicals and everything in between.

A couple of the emails asked about barley grass, a weed that is near and dear to me. It's one of the first weeds I got to grips with when I started in the agronomy industry and I can't wait to share my pearls of wisdom.

Barley grass is a nasty little pest that is found in most parts of the country but it's worst in the Hawke's Bay and the dryer areas of the South Island. It is an annual grass that germinates in the autumn and early winter and sets seed in the summer months.

There are six different species of barley grass present in New Zealand, but they all look very similar and can all be treated as one species. During its vegetative growth stage barley grass looks like an off-colour (less green) grass plant that tends to form a dense, carpet-like sward. For a brief period of time this vegetative growth will be palatable to stock but pretty soon into spring they will begin to avoid it like the plague.

During summer barley grass puts out its very recognisable seed head covered in lots



3 COMMON PLACES YOU'LL SPOT BARLEY GRASS

It tends to be found in areas of the farm that don't get much TLC but it can spread from these areas into productive paddocks very quickly. The areas to watch for it taking hold are:

- fence lines
- stock 'camps'
- laneways

of little awns. As one of my sons tells me, they look like little toothbrushes. These mature quickly and the seed they drop has a very high level of germination (90%+) which explains why barley grass can spread so quickly.

The presence of barley grass in a paddock is bad for two reasons. One, it's a rubbish grass and it takes over space that could be used to grow good grass. The second reason is even nastier: when the barley grass seeds mature their awns harden and become quite sharp. These seeds with a spear start getting stuck in everything like the eyes and mouths of grazing stock, their wool (which reduces its quality), your socks and subsequently your legs, to name a few places I've found them.

HOW TO CONTROL IT

Thankfully barley grass is quite easy to control so long as you are willing to take the time and plan out your approach thoughtfully. It is possible to use glyphosate to spot-spray barley grass but

this doesn't take care of the subsequent germination and can do a fair amount of damage to the surrounding pasture.

The best product to use is ethofumesate (product name Nortron). It is applied to the barley grass when it is vegetative but before the seed head has begun to develop. This timing tends to be from late May through to early August depending on the area. This kills the barley grass that is there, but it also has a residual effect that can finish off the next flush of germinating seeds.

The only real problem with this method is remembering where the barley grass patches are. The best thing to do is pop out in the summer and stake out the areas with barley grass so you can remember where they are when spraying them in the winter. ■

WHY IS IT A WEED?

It is a competitor of pastures and can affect stock health, growth and wool quality.

WHERE IS IT FOUND?

All across the country but more prevalent in dryer areas.

IS IT TOXIC? No

ALTERNATIVE USES?

Can be used for feed in the autumn but in my opinion the risks outweigh the benefits.

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