

HAWKBIT

I ALWAYS TRY to live by the motto “learn something new every day” and it always comes true when I get to spend a day out with my colleague Matthew. Matthew is a plant scientist in my team and is my go-to weed and agri-chemical expert.

When Matthew and I spent a couple of weeks training staff together recently, we would occasionally abscond afterwards to hunt for hidden areas of new and exciting weeds. We found a couple of real doozies – I’ll share them with you in upcoming columns.

This column is about the final of the ‘dandelion’ weeds. Hawkbit (*Leontodon taraxacoides*) is a common perennial weed found in most parts of New Zealand. It’s a native of Europe and North Africa but it made its way to New Zealand in the early days of settlement, presumably as a contaminant of pasture seed. As with the other dandelion look-alikes it’s a member of the daisy (*Asteraceae*) family, along with thistles, lettuce, artichokes and, of course, daisies.

I always like to throw in a couple of interesting facts about a weed here, but I’ll admit it was a little tricky to find anything for hawkbit. The family name *Leontodon* comes from the Greek word ‘lion’s tooth’ and refers to the jagged leaves. In medieval times it was thought that hawks nibbled on plants like this to gain better eyesight, which is why we have hawkbit, hawksbeard and hawkweed, but I’m not



Photo: Claus Ableiter



A seed head. Photo: John Tann

WHY IS IT A WEED?
It is a competitor of perennial crops and lawns

WHERE IS IT FOUND?
All across New Zealand

IS IT TOXIC?
No

ALTERNATIVE USES
None really

sure about the veracity of that last fact.

As I’ve been saying for the past few issues, it can be tricky to distinguish these weeds from each other. They all germinate and then form a ground-hugging rosette of leaves that all appear very similar. You can start to tell them apart at this stage - hawkbit and catsear produce a number of fine hairs on the leaf while hawksbeard and dandelion are hairless. Hawkbit leaves are narrower than catsear and have quite distinct, shallow lobes.

In spring, hawkbit produces its flowering stem and then it becomes easier to identify. It produces a single flowering stem (unlike catsear and hawksbeard which are branched) and the stem is thin

and wiry, quite unlike the single, fleshy and hollow flowering stem of dandelion.

HOW TO CONTROL IT

Hawkbit is a perennial weed that can dump a large number of wind-dispersed seeds very quickly each year so controlling it can be a bit of a mixed bag as it really depends on where you find it.

If you have it in pasture then the best method of control is maintaining a dense pasture sward – keep your pasture plants well fertilised and thick and that way there is nowhere for the weed to strike and establish.

If it is in a lawn or it has already invaded a pasture then chemical control is the only real option. Thankfully it is easier to control than others in this group as it doesn’t have quite the same long tap root of dandelion to help it recover from spraying. 2,4 D, MCPA, Dicamba and Versatil are all good options but remember to read the label carefully and be aware that these chemicals may be particularly harmful to beneficial plants like clover. ■



Photo: John Tann

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