

Pasture Weed Watch

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HENBIT

Why is it a weed?

Competitor in gardens, lawns and crops

Where is it found?

All over New Zealand

Is it toxic?

No

Alternative uses?

A delicious edible herb



MILTON MUNRO



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Henbit is a bit of a ubiquitous weed that's in every garden and doesn't often cause a lot of trouble. The only time it has given me grief was when we had it in the cereal crops I used to look after in South Canterbury/North Otago.

This lawn, garden and cropping weed is found all over New Zealand, but it's originally native to Europe, Asia and North Africa. Henbit is a member of the Lamiaceae family of plants, otherwise known as the mint family. The mint family contains



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many notable plants such as mint (you don't say!), basil, oregano, thyme, lavender and rosemary. One thing most members of the mint family share is that they are edible and henbit is too. The stem, leaves and flowers are all edible and apparently have a slightly sweet and peppery taste (once mine grows a little more I'll give it a whirl and report back).

The name henbit did intrigue me and with a little research I found out it is named such because hens like to eat it. Henbit is sometimes known as henbit deadnettle, and it's also often confused with another weed called red deadnettle. The 'deadnettle' reference comes from the fact it looks similar to a nettle but doesn't have the sting.

Identifying henbit is pretty easy. It is a late autumn to early winter-germinating annual. Like most members of the mint family, it has a four-sided square-ish stem which can be green to purple in colour and is sometimes covered in fine hairs. The leaves grow along the stem in opposite pairs. At the base of the stem the leaves have a short stalk but this disappears as you go up the stem, with the upper leaves attached directly to the stem. That's the reason for its Latin name 'amplexicaule' which means to clasp or encircle. The leaves are heart-shaped with deeply recessed veins, looking a bit like an un-ironed shirt.

Henbit produces its pretty purple flowers early in the spring. The flowers look almost orchid-like with white faces and pink spots.

It's a prolific seeder, with each plant capable of producing over 2000 seeds. If that wasn't enough, it can also spread by producing roots from the bottom of the stems that touch the ground.

HOW TO CONTROL IT

Controlling henbit can be pretty simple but it really depends on where it is. In gardens it's easy enough to simply pull it out. Just remember to get to it before flowering or it may have a chance to drop some seed.

In lawns it can be controlled through regularly mowing and kept out by maintaining a good dense vigorous turf.

In other situations it can be sprayed out using products like Dicamba and 2,4D, but these are only effective when the plant is at its small growth stages. Get to it early if you want to get rid of it.

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.