

SELFHEAL

WHY IS IT A WEED?

It is an unsightly competitor in turf

WHERE IS IT FOUND?

All over New Zealand

IS IT TOXIC?

No

ALTERNATIVE USES?

Used in herbal medicines

EVERY TIME I mow the lawns, it seems to end in disaster. The latest trim revealed that a good-sized patch of lawn has been invaded by a rather irritating pest of turf – selfheal. This invader needs to be dealt with if my hopes and dreams of a perfect lawn are ever to be realised.

Selfheal (*Prunella vulgaris*) is a common perennial weed of turfs across New Zealand, but its origins are shrouded in a bit of mystery. We think it's probably native to Europe and Asia but it has been found in North Africa and North America since before anyone can remember so no one can be 100% sure where it came from.

Selfheal is a member of the Lamiaceae family of plants, otherwise known as the mint family, which includes such notables as mint (surprise!), sage, lavender, basil (my favourite), catnip, thyme and even our recent topic, henbit.

Like most members of the mint family, selfheal is completely edible and young leaves can be used in salads, soups and stews. However, it's more commonly used in herbal medicine (the alternative name for

selfheal is heal-all) by many cultures around the world to treat a wide variety of ailments, including sore throats, fever, diarrhoea, bleeding, and skin irritation.

Apparently selfheal does it all, although I must profess to a little scepticism as scientific work has yet to determine exactly what health properties it has, so until then I would advise a little caution*.

Identifying selfheal is a cinch! No, really, I mean it. It's a mint so it's going to have a square stem. This stem throws out roots to anchor itself to the ground, creeping along and forming large patches within the turf. If allowed to it will actually grow to approximately 30cm, although this is rare if you're regularly mowing it off.

The leaves are typical of the mint family, lance-shaped and growing in opposite pairs along the stem. However, unlike many

members of the mint family, selfheal leaves have no minty scent when crushed.

During late spring and summer it will produce its distinctive club-like flower heads, a blocky structure chock-a-block full of little flowers that turn brown and die off after flowering.

HOW TO CONTROL IT

Due to its nature it is nearly impossible to get it out of a lawn as it hides itself too well, so if you want to get rid of it there are only chemical options.

Unfortunately, like most members of the mint family, it is resistant to many chemicals. You'll probably have the most success with 2,4D spiked with a little Dicamba, but even then it will take a couple of sprays for it to be gone for good.

Reference

Prunella vulgaris L. : A Literature Review on its Therapeutic Potentials; Rafia Rasool and Bashir A. Ganai, 2013. Pharmacologia, 4: 441-448

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