

SHEEP'S SORREL

Why is it a weed? It competes with desirable plants for water and nutrients in gardens and pasture (not as much).

Where is it found? All over New Zealand, but especially in dry areas.

Is it toxic? Yes, but stock seldom eat enough to show signs.

Alternative uses? It is edible - I know it's toxic but just read on and all will be revealed!



MILTON MUNRO

I have a confession: this article is late. Not just a little late, but very late. I have a deadline to get this article to *NZ Lifestyle Block*, but first it is checked and polished by my colleague Sarah the week before. However, she only got this column on the day it was due to go to the magazine.

Why was I so late? Winter is a surprisingly busy time of year - conferences, field days and training (both for me and the staff) - so all the other jobs I have get pushed into the margins. Thankfully I knew exactly what weed I wanted to write about, a little weed that's giving me grief around my own garden.

Sheep's sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*) is a perennial weed found all over New Zealand. It's originally native to Europe and Asia, but has spread all over the northern hemisphere and into Australasia. It is a tenacious weed and can handle extreme soil conditions, from dry to sandy to very acidic. It's a member of the Rumex genus of weeds which also includes all of the other sorrels (there are a few) and also the docks.

Admittedly, sheep's sorrel isn't a major weed issue in pasture. Usually it's

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there because some other factor is out of alignment, eg pH. But it can be a real nuisance in your home garden, and believe me, I know this from personal experience.

One interesting thing about sheep's sorrel is that it's edible and also toxic. You'd think that would be impossible but like all Rumex plants, it contains a group of toxic compounds known as oxalates and you have to eat quite a bit to get enough oxalates to cause any issues (although it has been known to happen). However, sheep's sorrel is mostly eaten as a garnish or a salad green, or used in cheesemaking. The youngest leaves are best as the older leaves taste very bitter and nasty, and again I'm speaking from experience.

This is a very easy weed to identify as its leaves are a dead giveaway, growing in a distinctive arrow shape, pointed at the end and then tapering in with two horizontal lobes at the base, forming a leafy rosette. The plants produce a creeping root system similar to a rhizome (underground stem).

The seed head it produces looks like a miniature version of a dock seed head (and since they're family, it's not surprising).

How to control it

Sheep's sorrel is an interesting weed to control. In pasture it's actually very easy: you simply lift the pH, raise the soil fertility and the grass and clover will easily outcompete it.

In a garden it gets a bit trickier. The plants in the garden aren't quite good enough to out-compete the sheep's sorrel so one option is to try and pull it out by hand, in which case you need to be careful to get all the root out (not so easy) or it will regenerate.

The other option is to spray but again, sheep's sorrel is clever. It's resistant to a lot of chemistry (including glyphosate) although if you want to try, a mixture of Dicamba and 2,4 D should do it. ■

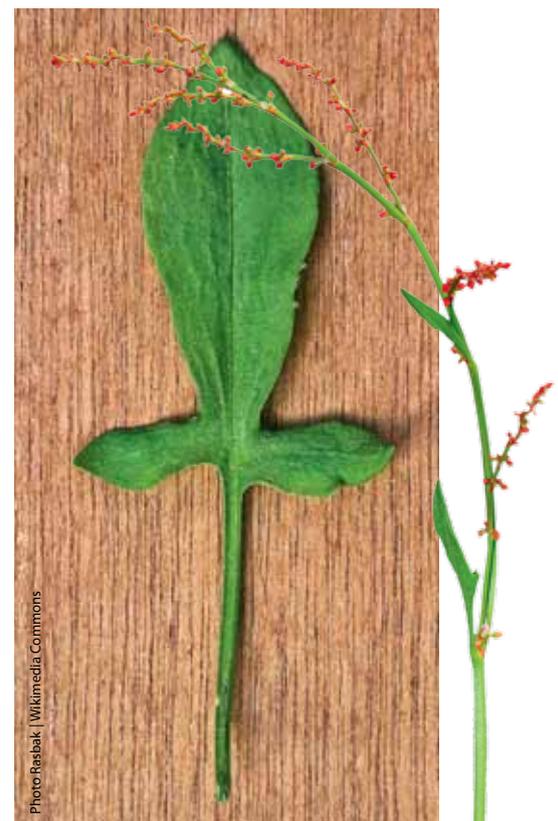


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DO YOU NEED HELP WITH A WEED PROBLEM?

If anyone has a request for a particular weed they would like to know more about please don't hesitate to let Milton know: mmunro@pggwrightson.co.nz