

TWIN CRESS

Lepidium didymum

Why is it a weed? It competes with useful pasture species and can taint the flavour of milk produced from animals that have grazed it.

Where is it found? All over New Zealand, but especially in the North Island and Southland.

Is it toxic? No, but it does taint the flavour of milk.

Alternative uses? Twin cress is edible and also used as a herbal medicine.

What is it trying to tell you?

Your soil is pugged, or has been left bare for too long.



Twin Cress - Photo Forest and Kim Starr Wikimedia Common



although it is more common in the North Island and Southland. It's originally native to South America but it has now spread all over the world.

This member of the Brassica family (this is what the kids figured out) is related to the likes of cabbage, kale, broccoli etc, so it's a fairly benign weed. It's not particularly competitive and it's not toxic. In fact, it's often used as a salad herb in parts of South America, adding a strong mustard flavour.

But twin cress does have one very nasty characteristic that anyone with milking animals will want to avoid. It is one of the worst tainters of milk, butter and cream in the world. Even small quantities of twin cress in the diet of milking animals can give the milk a taste that's not the best idea for a milkshake.

To make matters worse it is almost impossible to detect this taint in raw milk - it only comes out when the milk is heated. NZ had one very bad year in 1987 when the Waitoa branch of the New Zealand Co-Operative Dairy Company had to substantially reduce its payout to farmers due to twin cress tainted milk.

Twin cress germinates in autumn or spring in paddocks that are open or pugged - it doesn't like heavy pasture competition - producing long trailing stems from a central crown. The lower leaves are stalked and finely divided, while the upper leaves have no stalk.

Twin cress is self-pollinating with small green flowers, which may or may not have small white petals. It's also a prolific seeder, producing at least 1600 seeds per plant, but numbers of up to 18,000 seeds have also been recorded.



Twin Cress - Photo Basbak Wikimedia Common

How to control it

This is thankfully straightforward. Twin cress doesn't like competition so maintaining a good dense pasture sward prevents it from getting a toe-hold.

If it does manage to get into a paddock, chemical control is simple. If at the seedling stage it can be selectively removed with products like Tropotox Plus (clover safe). If it's well past seedling stage (more than 8 stems coming off the crown) then 2,4D is an effective product (not clover safe, so be careful).

One thing to remember is to keep animals away from sprayed twin cress for at least three weeks as when it's dying it becomes more palatable and animals are more likely to gorge on it.

That's it for another month - I'm off to continue encouraging/corrupting my three little agronomists. ■

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:
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MILTON MUNRO

I'm rather proud of my three junior agronomists. They can identify most crops, their insect identification is pretty good, and their weed knowledge surpasses most customers I talk to. Together we form an unstoppable juggernaut of agronomic excellence and a never-ending source of bemusement to my poor wife.

Recently the kids blew me away with their weed identification. They found a weed they didn't know but they were able to apply what they knew about other weeds and their families to make an educated guess about what family it belonged to. This is a really valuable skill for the budding agronomist, so to celebrate that proud 'Dad moment' this month's weed is the kids' unknown weed, twin cress.

Lepidium didymum (say the scientific name out loud, it's awesome!) is an annual weed found all over New Zealand,

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.