



VETCH

IT'S A NARROW LINE that separates a productive plant and a weed. One day a plant can be your prize crop, and the next it's plaguing the farm. It really highlights how true the old adage is that a weed is only a plant in the wrong place.

Many of the plants I talk about in this column can sit as both a useful plant and also a weed. Take a look at the shelves in your local health food store. There's quinoa and amaranthus, delicious or troubling weeds depending on context.

This month's weed almost sets the standard for blurring the line between pain and prize. Common vetch (*Vicia sativa*) is a weed found all across New Zealand. It's originally native to Europe and Asia, but has successfully colonised its way around the world and can now be found nearly everywhere.

Vetch belongs to the Fabaceae family of plants, also known as the legumes, pea and bean family. As with all members of this family, that means it has the awesome ability to fix nitrogen. This is a hugely competitive advantage and allows vetch to rapidly colonise areas quickly.

It's often used as an agricultural crop. Animals love it, especially horses, with many owners including a bit of vetch seed in their pasture mixes. It's also used as a cover crop, a specific crop that is grown and then ploughed back into the soil to supply organic matter and nitrogen for a subsequent crop. This is a valuable tool in an organic farming

rotation where conventional nitrogen cannot be used. Vetch has also been a food source for humans since the stone age and was one of humankind's first domesticated crops.

Vetch is a quite distinctive annual that can germinate any time outside the winter months. The stem is a hollow, four-sided structure that can grow to a height of two metres, and it produces a large number of compound leaves. These leaves are made up of three to eight opposite pairs of leaflets which grow to about 3.5cm in length. At the end of each compound leaf is a tendril similar to what is seen on a pea plant, not surprising given their shared ancestry.

After a couple of months of growing, it begins to produce flowers. These are reminiscent of a sweet pea flower and are usually pink or purple. The plant then produces a typical legume pod, which reminds me of a broom seed pod. This pod splits and explodes the seeds over a reasonable area.

HOW TO CONTROL IT

When vetch is a weed, it's usually in a garden or a broad acre crop like wheat or barley. In a home garden, it's relatively easily controlled through manual extraction – that's the flash term for pulling it out. In pasture, you can mulch it back into the soil at flowering, not a bad idea considering its nitrogen content.

Controlling vetch in large-scale crops



WEED

Vetch

WHY IS IT A WEED?

It is a competitor of broad acre crops and gardens.

WHERE IS IT FOUND?

All over the country

IS IT TOXIC?

No

ALTERNATIVE USES?

It can be used as an animal forage and also as a cover crop.

can be a little tricky. Versatil Power Flo is the best bet chemically but this product is toxic to clover.

Whatever method you choose, get onto it early when the weeds are small and you will have the best results. ■

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