

Water pepper & willow weed

MILTON MUNRO



I can't believe that it's the New Year already. Here's hoping that your Christmas was filled with sun, wine, family and food, all the important stuff!

Summer is a great time for our family as it's a chance to get the kids out in the field with me. My three budding little agronomists love walking through crops, digging holes, finding bugs and identifying weeds, and let me tell you there are some weeds out there this year.

The mild winter sent weeds into overdrive, and two in particular have been giving the crops some grief in the bottom of both islands.

Water pepper (*Persicaria hydropiper*) and willow weed (*Persicaria maculosa*) are both commonly found across New Zealand. Both are members of the Polygonaceae family which includes dock, buckwheat and sorrel. The name Polygonum means "many knees" and comes from the swollen nodes most members of this family have. These swollen nodes apparently resemble a knee, but I'm the first to admit it takes a bit of imagining.

Both water pepper and willow weed are native to Europe and Asia but have spread all over New Zealand, Australia and the US. Willow weed is considered to be slightly toxic to stock but is never really an issue because of its foul and bitter taste. On the other hand, water pepper is actually cultivated in Japan and is used as a vegetable, with the seeds commonly added to wasabi.

However, care should be taken when handling either of these weeds as they produce a number of nasty oils that can cause some serious skin irritation.

They are very similar-looking plants, with many people incorrectly identifying one as the other. Both have a long fleshy stem - up to 40cm for willow weed and 75cm for water pepper - with alternating, long narrow leaves. The stems can be quite red and many farmers refer to both weeds as 'redshank'.

Willow weed often has a dark spot in the middle of its leaves that is usually absent



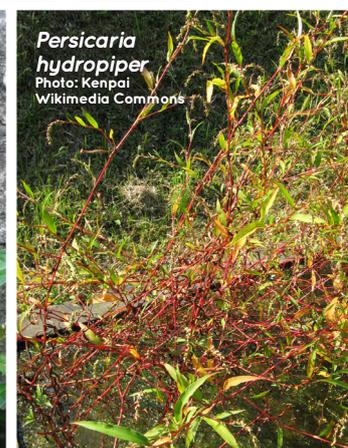
Persicaria maculosa
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Persicaria hydropiper
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Persicaria maculosa
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Persicaria hydropiper
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in water pepper but the best way to tell the two apart is to look at the flowers. Willow weed flowers are small, pink and clustered into a tight cylinder at the end of the stem, whereas water peppers are pale pink/white and are spread out along the end of the stem.

Both weeds are prolific seeders and the seeds they produce are exceptionally hardy, with germination levels remaining high for many years.

CONTROLLING WATER PEPPER & WILLOW WEED

Because animals won't graze either, a few plants in a paddock can become a whole lot very quickly so it's important to get on top of them ASAP.

If it's just a few plants they can be pulled out relatively easily. If it's a big patch then spraying is an option. If the weeds are very small (four leaves and under) then 2,4DB can be used without risk to clover. If they are a bit bigger (4-8 leaves) then a mixture of Tropotox Plus and Preside can be used (again, without risk to the clover). However

if they are big and flowering (sigh) the only option is good rates of 2,4D but this will mess up the clover. If possible spray early or better yet, pull them out as soon as you see them.

I hope 2014 brings you all just as much fun and success as 2013. Thanks for reading everyone! n

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.

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