

WILD TURNIP

Brassica rapa subsp. Sylvestris

MILTON MUNRO



It seems I'm in the dog box. I have been writing this column for almost two years and not once in that time have I mentioned my long-suffering wife. She's the wonderful woman who puts up with all my eccentricities, my pathological need to dig holes to look at soil, my excitement at finding weeds, my long-winded explanations of the finer points of plant and soil science. This one is for you honey!

My wife does occasionally get excited over weeds. If we're out for a drive I'll often hear an exclamation like this:

"Look at the pretty paddock Milton! Now that's a plant I like, beautiful yellow flowers."

"But darling that's wild turnip, a nasty weed, that paddock is an agronomic disaster... (long tirade about the agronomic effects of weeds on crop yields deleted for brevity)... and that's why it should have been sprayed!"

"Well, I don't care, it's beautiful."

And that's why this month's weed is wild turnip, the bane of Brassica crops and my wife's favourite weed.

Wild turnip is a persistent annual weed found all over New Zealand, but it is particularly troublesome in Canterbury, Otago and Southland. The European native is a member of the Brassica family of plants whose notable members include cabbages, broccoli and cauliflower. In fact, this humble plant is thought to have been one of the early progenitors of our cultivated Brassicas, with turnips,

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.



Pasture weed
Photos: Rasbak, Wikimedia Commons



swedes, pak choi and bok choi all being subspecies of *Brassica rapa* (turnip = *Brassica rapa subsp. rapa*).

Like its relatives, wild turnip is completely edible. The young leaves apparently taste a lot like bok choi although I call this statement into question - having tried some, I would liken the flavour to ear wax, very bitter and very nasty. But let's have a round of applause for the ancient breeders who got rid of that characteristic!

Wild turnip starts its annual lifecycle in spring as a rosette, with the growing point right at ground level and the leaves radiating out around it. The leaves are very distinctive, with deep divides running along the lower half of the leaf and rough bristly hairs covering the top half. From the centre of the rosette comes a long (up to 1.5 m) stem. The leaves on this stem are small, spear-shaped and smooth.

At the end of the stem the plant produces a large number of small (1.5 cm) bright yellow flowers. These flowers tower so far above the crop they are infesting, it gives a paddock the sea of yellow that my darling wife loves so much.

These flowers then develop into seed pods which ripen and open, showering the area around the plant with fresh seed. Wild turnip is a very prolific seeder - one plant can colonise a large area in a very

short space of time and the seed lasts for many years in the soil so it can be a real headache for a very long time.

How to control it

Sometimes it feels like an exercise in futility trying to control wild turnip, especially in another Brassica crop as no matter how many plants you kill there always seems to be more coming through. The best method for dealing with a few plants is to pull them before they seed. However, if you are dealing with a 'sea of yellow' then we need to get smarter. If the problem is in pasture, you could use selective products like Tropicox Plus but you'd need to spray before the stem appears. Once the stem is up, control is difficult.

In a crop of Brassicas it is impossible to control it - how do you take a Brassica out of a Brassica? In this case you'd need to try crop rotation, or explore the use of herbicide-tolerant Brassica varieties. ■

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