

WIREWEED

POLYGONUM AVICULARE

MILTON MUNRO



Knowing exactly what weed you've got can be a pretty tricky thing to work out.

One of those misleading weeds is known as wireweed. Some others are mistakenly identified as wireweed - hedge mustard and the like - as they really do resemble a thick, coarse wire.

Wireweed or *Polygonum aviculare* is an annual weed found all over New Zealand. It's a member of the Polygonum family whose members include the sorrels, rhubarb, buckwheat and many common weeds like willow weed and docks. The name Polygonum is a bit of a laugh - it means 'many knees' - and refers to the plant's many nodes (the bit where the leaves come off the stem for the non-botanists out there), looking a bit like a knee might on a skinny leg.

Wireweed gets its name from the distinctive mess it leaves at the end of its lifecycle. During its vegetative stage it tends to be still quite fleshy but once it has gone to seed it dies and dries back into a clump of tough wire-like stems.

Wireweed germinates in early spring to early summer. It can easily establish itself in paddocks when the soil is too wet for anything else to grow so it is commonly found in gateways, pugged paddocks and any other bare patches in the paddock.

When wireweed germinates it first produces a few very slim and slight leaves - it can almost be confused for a grass plant at this stage - but it then rapidly develops its long and snaking stem, with its distinctive swollen nodes and blue/green leaves.

Where the plant establishes itself will influence its final appearance. In wasteland areas the plant tends to be flat against the ground with very small leaves, but in fertile crop paddocks it is upright and leafy.

It flowers from early summer to early autumn, with small white/pink flowers emerging from the base of each of the leaves, then produces a small nut as a



Flowers and leaves
Photo: Daljal,
Wikimedia Commons

The plant's nodes look like a knee might on a skinny leg.



Flowers
Photo: Airwok,
Wikimedia Commons



Taproot
Photo: Sten-Porse,
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seed. These are quite tough and can maintain their viability for a long time in the soil.

CONTROLLING WIREWEED

This can be difficult, especially if it has been allowed to get away and develop. The best way to control wireweed is to hit it when it is small and vegetative (preferably with no more than 6-8 leaves). Dicamba is a good spray option if you need to remove it from pasture, or alternatively it can be rogued (pulled) out of a garden or crop but do remember to dig out each plant's large taproot or else it will regenerate. ■



Growth pattern
Photo: Rasbak,
Wikimedia Commons

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 me know:
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