Stinkwort: a troublesome summer weed

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ONE of the commonest weeds in Western Australia is stinkwort, a vigorous plant which can be a nuisance in many parts of the State during late summer.

From a distance, at this time of the year, stinkwort often looks like a succulent summer crop. It is green when other herbage is dry, but it has little nutritive value and is not relished by stock.

Some farmers claim that it is a useful forage, but this view is not generally accepted. It has in fact been shown that stinkwort can, indirectly, cause losses in sheep.

Drawbacks

Stinkwort has a variety of drawbacks.

It competes for moisture in the summer, and can be a troublesome weed of summer crops and pastures, particularly during the establishment of plants such as lucerne.

The wool of sheep pastured on stinkwort country is often discoloured by contact with the sticky leaves. Fortunately the stain is not permanent and can be removed by scouring, so does not reduce the value of the wool.

Milk and butter have been tainted after stinkwort has been eaten by dairy cows, and it is also claimed that the flavour of mutton can be affected if the weed is grazed by sheep.

A form of dermatitis has been attributed to handling stinkwort particularly when in flower, and the effects have lasted for weeks or even months.

Stock Losses

The possible toxicity of stinkwort was a problem for many years. Although stock losses were often associated with grazing stinkwort paddocks, analyses of plants failed to show any toxic substance, and feeding and drenching trials gave negative results.

Most of the trouble in the field occurred towards the end of summer when the plants were seeding freely and other feed was scarce, and the damage to stock was eventually found to be the result of irritation and penetration of the bowel lining by the barbed pappus hairs attached to the seed.

These small hairs often remain imbedded in the lining, providing conditions favourable for the rapid multiplication of the enterotoxaemia or braxy-like disease bacteria. Absorption of the bacterial toxin produced can cause death, so although not toxic in itself, stinkwort may cause conditions which encourage this disease.

Origin and Distribution

Stinkwort originated in the Mediterranean region. It was first recorded in Australia at Onkaparinga in South Australia, about 90 years ago, and despite early efforts to keep it in bounds it is now firmly established in all agricultural districts of South Australia. It also covers large areas in New South Wales and Victoria, and is found in most agricultural districts of Western Australia.

It grows in late spring and summer, particularly in moist places, and is most vigorous on fallow where moisture has been conserved.

Description

Stinkwort owes its common name to the presence of a volatile oil with a strong and characteristic odour, secreted by the
small glandular hairs present on all parts of the plant. Dust and other light particles adhere readily to the sticky surface of the leaves.

It is an erect annual up to three feet high, with many spreading, leafy branches. The leaves are lance-shaped with small teeth on the lower part of the plant, becoming narrower on the upper part.

The numerous small yellow flower heads are grouped in loose, pyramid-like panicles. The small, almost cylindrical seeds have a thistle-like appendage, known as a pappus.

**CONTROL**

Small infestations of stinkwort can be handled by pulling or hoeing, but in most places it is too widespread for this to be practicable.

Some degree of control results from heavy grazing while the plants are small.

Cultivation to prevent seed formation is also carried out, but often during the summer soils are too hard to plough, and working also increases erosion hazards. Mowing at the early flowering stage is helpful, but cannot be expected to stop all plants from seeding.

**Herbicides**

Stinkwort is not highly susceptible to the hormone-like herbicides, but can be controlled by spraying with 2, 4-D ester at the rate of from 1 to 2 lb. acid equivalent per acre. The lower rate is effective when the plants are small, but the 2 lb. per acre rate is recommended for larger plants.

Patches can be spot sprayed, using a knapsack or hand lead from a power unit. With this method, 100 gallons of solution an acre is convenient.

For many extensive infestations a low volume boom unit is desirable. This can apply the solution at the rate of from six to 10 gallons an acre.

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**SWINE FEVER IS COSTLY IN N.S.W.**

The swine fever toll in New South Wales for 1961 was 12,500 head. Pig Farmers were paid £120,000 compensation for stock destroyed, burned or buried by direction of the Department of Agriculture.

During December infected pigs were found on four properties—three being outside the quarantine area.

Eighty-three farms were found to carry infected stock last year.

The New South Wales Department of Agriculture appealed for full support from farmers in its eradication campaign. Because of the insidious nature of the disease it was essential that any sickness or deaths in pigs be reported.

The earlier the notification the more chance there was of containing the disease and preventing its spread, and the quicker it would be eradicated, said the Department.
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