

The virtues of some weeds on a midlands grazing property

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The merit and reputation of many plant species is tarnished once they are designated weeds. The term weed implies to most people that there is something bad or inherently detrimental in the species and that it should be controlled or eradicated as a matter of course. Only to the casual or unformed observer does the presence of weeds on a farm suggest that the farmer is uncaring, perhaps incompetent, and unappreciative of the consequence of weed growth.

Whether or not a plant is bad or detrimental in a particular farming situation depends on the circumstances, and it would be wrong to assume that all plants referred to as weeds have no virtues.

Many common weeds cause little physical harm or economic loss on a grazing property, and rather than take action against them farmers should use their time, effort, and money combating those which have a serious physical or economic impact on the farm or weeds which he has some chance of eradicating.

In the Midlands area of Tasmania Gorse (*Ulex eurooaesus*), Spear Thistle (*Cirsium vul re*), Slender Thistle (*Carduus scpp.*), Variegated Thistle (*Silybum marianum*), and Cape Weed (*Arctotheca calendula*) are widespread and obvious, often causing alarm to the farmer. All can be easily controlled in crops in a variety of ways if circumstances require. In a grazing situation they cause little harm, have some beneficial effects, and can be lived with if they are considered as part of the grazing enterprise ecosystem.

Concern is often expressed at the apparent spread and increase of these weeds. As gorse bushes increase in size from year to year the illusion is created that it is spreading rapidly: while the populations of the annual and biennial weeds of this group rise and fall intermittently as they are subjected to changing environmental and ecological forces.

Beneficial effects and attributes of these weeds are :-

Gorse :

- Feed for sheep and cattle
- Shelter for stock
- Wildlife habitat
- Fences and protection from intruders
- Protection of conventional fences from wind and water borne debris
- Beauty and scented atmosphere when flowering
- Warmth when burnt

Thistles :

- Feed for sheep, cattle and horses
- Shelter for stock
- Wildlife habitat and food supply
- Rations other pasture feed
- "Fairies" for the delight of children.

Cape Weed :

- Early and rapid growth on light soils
- Covers bare areas of grub damaged pasture on light soils in poor seasons
- Feed for sheep early in autumn and winter
- Beauty when flowering .

