

COMMON HELIOTROPE

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1. Mature plant
2. Flower spike
3. Infestation
4. Close-up view of flowers
5. Seedlings
(Photos: Robyn Knox)

COMMON HELIOTROPE

What you should know about common heliotrope

Common heliotrope (*Heliotropium europaeum* L.) is also known as caterpillar weed, Wanderie curse or potato weed. It is a member of the borage family (Boraginaceae) like Paterson's curse, corn gromwell and yellow burr weed (*Amsinckia*). It was accidentally introduced to Australia from the Mediterranean region last century and has since become a major weed problem in New South Wales, Victoria and

South Australia. There are also scattered outbreaks in the Perth metropolitan area, wheatbelt and pastoral districts of Western Australia. Common heliotrope is a declared plant in Western Australia because it is a potentially important toxic weed. It may not be grown and any plants found must be destroyed.

Why common heliotrope matters to you

Common heliotrope contains at least five poisonous alkaloids. If stock eat enough they may suffer cumulative liver damage. This leads to jaundice, photosensitisation and indirectly copper toxicity because damaged liver cells cannot regulate copper levels in the blood. Symptoms are seldom seen unless stock have grazed common heliotrope for more than one season or common heliotrope following Paterson's curse

Five poisons in one plant

during the previous winter. Death is often triggered by stress, long after stock have been removed from infested areas. Stock may eat large amounts of heliotrope because it is frequently the only green feed available in summer. British breed sheep, cattle and horses are more susceptible to heliotrope poisoning than merino sheep. Poultry deaths have also been linked with grain contaminated with heliotrope seed.

What you should look for

- Heliotrope is an erect, strongly rooted plant growing up to 0.3 m tall.
- Leaves are grey-green, oval and arranged alternately on thick stalks
- Leaves and stems are covered in short, coarse, white hairs and have prominent veins.
- The flowers are small (less than 5 mm in diameter) and white with a yellow throat.

Summer-growing grey-green plant with white flowers on one side of stem

They form in two closely-packed rows on one side of a slender coiled spike. As the flowers develop the spike straightens.

- Common heliotrope seeds consist of a group of four single-seeded nutlets per flower, each 2mm long. The outer surface is rough with a smooth, concave inner surface.
- Heliotrope has an unpleasant smell when crushed.

Why common heliotrope might succeed in WA

Common heliotrope is found on a wide range of soil types, but prefers loamy soils where there is little competing vegetation. It is frequently found in dryland annual pastures and summer fallows. Common heliotrope is a summer-growing annual plant. It grows rapidly after late spring and summer rain and flowers quickly, producing viable seeds. It continues to produce flowers and seeds as late as April provided moisture persists, but it can tolerate

drought. The seeds may remain viable but dormant for several years. They are the only means of spread. Seed may be carried internally by animals without loss of viability or attached to wool, vehicles and machinery, or in chaff and grain. Its occurrence in any one year depends on the timing and amount of summer rainfall. Heavily infested sites may have no plants the following year if little rain falls.

What you can do about it

Take care not to bring heliotrope seeds on to your property. If you find heliotrope, control it to prevent further spread.

Where to find out more

For further information on heliotrope contact the Agriculture Protection Board, Baron-Hay Court, South Perth 6151. Telephone (09) 368 3472 or the nearest country office of the APB or the Department of Agriculture.
