

Lavant Horticultural Society



Oxalis corniculata (Procumbent yellow sorrel, creeping wood sorrel)

The common names of this plant are misleading, as it has nothing to do with sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*), whose leaves are used in salads, soups and as an alternative to spinach, except that, like spinach, that sorrel does have a high oxalic acid content.

Some members of the oxalis family are cultivated as ornamental plants, with their clover-like leaves and pink or yellow flowers. Indeed, *Oxalis corniculata* itself looks like a pretty little plant – its small leaves, each made up of three heart shaped leaflets, at the end of thin reddish brown stems, form a mat over the ground; their colour ranges from a grey-green with a hint of purple round the edges to almost completely purple. Tiny bright yellow

flowers sit sparsely above the foliage, opening their five petals fully in bright light, and then closing them up again when it gets dark.

Its delicate appearance belies its toughness – it spreads quickly, infiltrates other plants and is difficult to eradicate. It sends out runners which readily root at the nodes. It builds up a mass of thin brown roots which can go quite deep and stores energy in taproots shaped like miniature carrots. They deprive adjacent plants of moisture and nutrients, whilst its foliage can smother low growing plants.

It also spreads further afield, thanks to its ballistic seed dispersal. As the seed pod ripens, it literally explodes, firing the seeds away from the parent plant; you can find new plants cropping up all over the place - flower beds, vegetable plots, and plant pots, even cracks in paving or at the base of walls.



How to control it? Total weed-killers that go right down to the roots, such as glyphosate based ones, are effective, especially on oxalis growing in paths or walls, where you just cannot get to the roots and there is no danger of damaging other plants (don't think it can do no harm in places like this – it will soon be shooting its seed elsewhere).

Where it is surrounded by other plants, carefully probe down with a hand fork deep enough to loosen the soil round all its roots (not forgetting those that have formed at the nodes of the runners), so they can be extracted without any bits breaking off. It can regenerate from the smallest bit that is left behind. Sometimes you will have to unravel its roots from those of adjacent cultivated plants. This disruption is not ideal for those plants concerned, but is much preferable to leaving them to have their energy sapped by the growing oxalis.

Don't feel bad about destroying *Oxalis corniculata*; however assiduously you go about eradicating it from your garden, you will almost certainly be seeing it again.