

# Fat-hen Management in Organic Systems

## Where does it occur and why is it a problem?

- Fat-hen is an annual weed that occurs on most soils but grows best on fertile land
- It is mainly a problem of spring sown crops such as potatoes, sugar beet and vegetables
- It hinders harvesting and reduces the yield of any crop in which it occurs
- The seed has been a common contaminant of crop seed



Fat-hen seedlings

## Biology, persistence and spread

- Fat-hen seedlings can emerge from May to September but the main flush is in spring
- Seedlings are frost sensitive and do not overwinter
- Most seedlings emerge from the top 3 cm of soil, a few from as deep as 6 cm
- Earlier emerging plants grow bigger before flowering and have more seeds
- Plants can reach up to 3 m in height
- Flowering occurs from July to September in response to day length
- Later emerging plants are smaller having less time to grow before flowering
- Seed production varies with plant size, around 3000 seeds on an average plant
- Plants produce seeds with different germination strategies. Most are black, shiny and persistent, up to 5% are brown and germinate more readily
- The time to 95% loss for seed in cultivated soil is around 6 years but seeds can persist for over 40 years in soil
- Seeds can occur in manure and a few may remain viable even after composting
- Most seeds are killed by a combination of ensilage and rumen digestion



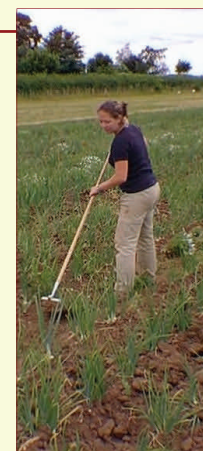
Fat-hen seedling

## How can it be prevented?

- As an annual weed, seed production is the key to fat-hen's success
- Avoid contaminated seed, particularly of home saved seed
- Avoid mature seed shedding in the crop
- Set the combine harvester to retain weed seeds for disposal off farm. The scarification of seed during combining can significantly increase the level of germination
- Keep soil disturbance to a minimum during seedbed preparation, seedling numbers are related to the number of cultivations

## Direct control options

- Delay sowing and use a stale seedbed to kill weed seedlings before cropping
- Sow a spring crop early e.g. February to avoid the peak germination period of fat-hen
- Select winter sown crops and more competitive varieties where possible
- Apply shallow surface cultivations while weeds are small and before the taproot becomes established
- In a young grass/clover ley allow stock to trample whilst in the seedling stage or top later
- Use inter-row cultivation in row crops
- Flame weed while seedlings are at the susceptible 2-6 leaf stage
- Cut and if possible catch flowering seed heads which have emerged above the crop e.g. in kale or beet



Hand hoeing in onions



Tractor hoeing in cereals

## By hand

- Hoeing and hand weeding in high value crops
- Hand pulling of mature plants present in low numbers will prevent seed shedding

## Biological control

- In research trials, applications of the fungus *Ascochyta caulina* as a post emergence mycoherbicide have resulted in necrosis and mortality of fat-hen. Trials are continuing but to be effective the fat-hen must be at the seedling stage and a period of high humidity is needed after treatment
- Fat-hen seeds are eaten by birds and by ground beetles

## More information:

- Fat-hen has been used as forage for stock but it can contain potentially dangerous levels of nitrates and also contains oxalic acid which can be harmful to sheep and pigs, although poisoning is rare
- It was eaten as a vegetable from Neolithic times till the 16<sup>th</sup> century when it was replaced by spinach and cabbage
- Fat-hen may act as a host to the mangold fly and the black bean aphid
- Fat-hen is a very important food source for many bird species and biodiversity studies have suggested it is a weed which should be encouraged in arable systems
- See the leaflet in this series on 'Annual Weed Management in Organic Systems' for more control ideas

If you have any observations or experiences with fat-hen management please let us know by contacting us directly or through the website

## Notes:

For further information on weed management go to [www.gardenorganic.org.uk/weed-management](http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/weed-management). There you will find the following:

- ◆ Advice on over 130 individual weeds, from Black Grass to Yarrow [www.gardenorganic.org.uk/weeds-list](http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/weeds-list)
- ◆ Advice on cultivation controls, such as crop rotation, tillage and hygiene [www.gardenorganic.org.uk/cultural-weed-controls](http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/cultural-weed-controls)
- ◆ Direct control methods, such as mulching and mechanical control [www.gardenorganic.org.uk/direct-weed-controls](http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/direct-weed-controls)
- ◆ Crop weeding strategies, in field vegetables, fruits and grasslands [www.gardenorganic.org.uk/crop-weed-management-strategies](http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/crop-weed-management-strategies)
- ◆ Further reading in research papers.



This leaflet was produced as part of the 2006 DEFRA funded project '**Participatory Investigation of the Management of Weeds in Organic Production Systems**'. Organisations involved included HDRA, The Organic Research Centre, Warwick Horticultural Research International, ADAS, and Rulivsys. The information has been produced from a range of sources, including farmers, advisors and researchers, and we gratefully acknowledge their contributions. It is one of a number of leaflets written to give an overview of non-chemical weed control opportunities and developments in the crops covered. They include historical information and summaries of more recent research.

### Disclaimer

The information contained in this leaflet has been compiled from a range of sources. It is accurate to the best of our knowledge. Authors are not responsible for outcomes of any actions taken based on this information.