

**Common Name:** Canada thistle

**Scientific Name:** *Cirsium arvense* L.

**Family:** Sunflower family (Asteraceae)

**Similar/Related Species:** Bull thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*). *Cirsium edule*, the edible thistle, is a native thistle found at the southern tip of the panhandle.

**Description:** Plants to five feet tall with ridged, branching stems. Leaves curled, wavy, oblong, alternate on stem with wooly hairs on underside. Leaves arise directly from the stem without a distinct leaf stalk. Flowers purple-pink. Male and female flowers found on separate plants. Flower heads  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 1 inch across.

**Involucral bracts lack spines.**

**Life History:** Perennial, forms colonies by a deep rhizome system that can eventually cover acre size areas. Can also spread by wind blown seeds.

**Where Found:** Canada thistle has shown up in many towns in southeast Alaska, where it appears to have stowed away in root balls of ornamental plants or hitchhiked on muddy construction sites.

**Habitat:** Grows in cultivated fields, pastures, rangelands, forests, and along roadsides, ditches, and river banks. Does best in disturbed upland areas but also invades wet areas with fluctuating water levels including streambank sedge meadows and wet praries.

**Impacts:** Reported in 1952 to infest more acreage than any other noxious weed in the states of Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington. Reduces recreational value of parks and sports fields. In heavy concentrations it reduces

a pasture's potential to support livestock by preventing grazing, and it is also highly competitive with crops.

Photo: Weed Science Society of America



Gary A. Monroe @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database





Photo: Weed Science Society of America

**Control Options:** One of our most difficult-to-control weeds. Activities like hand pulling and tillage that disturb the soil break up the root systems causing further spread of the plant. Mowing is only effective if repeated monthly for several years. Any Canada thistle management program needs to include a revegetation strategy and continued monitoring over a period of several years. There can be great diversity in the morphology, phenology, and response to herbicides of the plants, even within the same field.

**Herbicide Options:** Herbicides are effective for Canada thistle only if applied at the proper stage of growth. Applications are most effective when the plant is translocating photosynthetic products from leaf to root in late summer, but are ineffective if the plant is in flower or seed-set stage. Mowing the plants after flowering forces them back into a more juvenile growth stage making them more susceptible to herbicide treatment. Mow plants mid to late summer, then spray two to four weeks post application. Glyphosate, clopyralid, 2,4-D, MCPA and metsulfuron methyl are all effective if applied properly. Use clopyralid cautiously as it is active in the soil and can be absorbed by the roots of desirable vegetation.

Illustrations: NRCS PLANTS Database

