



Whatcom Weeds

Whatcom County Noxious Weed Control Board 901 W. Smith Road Bellingham WA 98226
(360) 715-7470 www.co.whatcom.wa.us/publicworks/weeds

BULL THISTLE

Cirsium vulgare

THREAT: Bull thistle is native to Eurasia, although it is now established on every continent except Antarctica. It was introduced to North America as a contaminant of seed, probably during colonial times, and is now common throughout much of the continent. It commonly invades orchards, turfgrass, pastures, landscapes, nurseries, old fields and other disturbed sites. Reproduction is by seed only and mature plants can produce up to 4000 seeds. The seed is spread by wind and usually germinates rapidly, quickly colonizing any recently disturbed sites. Seeds do not appear to remain viable for a long period of time near the soil surface, however seeds buried at a depth of six inches have survived for three years.

DESCRIPTION: Bull thistle is a biennial, growing up to 6.5 feet tall. A basal rosette of leaves is formed in the first year. After overwintering as a green rosette, the plant sends up tall flowering stems. These erect stems usually have spreading branches and are covered by white woolly hairs. Prominent ridges run down the stem from the leaf bases, and the entire plant is covered with prominent spines. It has a fleshy taproot, as opposed to the rhizomatous root system of Canada thistle. Solitary 1 to 2 inch purple flowers bloom at the end of each branch. The dead stems remain standing into the following winter. Bull thistle is the larger of the two common thistles of Whatcom County, the other being Canada thistle. Bull thistle is identified by its more robust form and the non-rhizomatous root system. Bull thistle grows in a variety of soil types, especially after disturbance, but does not grow in deep shade.



MANAGEMENT OPTIONS: Bull thistle can be controlled by mechanical and chemical methods. Hand pulling or digging is effective but the disturbed soil may allow additional thistle seeds to sprout. To avoid disturbing the soil, the flowering stems can be cut at the soil surface when the plants are at bud stage. Plants usually do not resprout after such treatment but should be rechecked later in the season and in the following year. Similarly, mowing can be used to limit seed spread. If timed properly, most seed fall can be prevented by mowing once between the time when plants bolt and when they flower, followed by a second mowing, a month later. If flowers are open when the stems are cut, the thistle may still set seed (in such a situation, stems can be burned to prevent seed production). Bull thistle can also be controlled through repeated cultivation. The bull thistle gall fly has been used as a biological control and can reduce seed production up to 60%. Bull thistle can also be controlled through chemical means; for site specific recommendations, contact the weed control board.