



Whatcom Weeds

Whatcom County Noxious Weed Control Board 901 W. Smith Road Bellingham WA 98226
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CANADA THISTLE

Cirsium arvense

THREAT: Canada thistle, also called creeping thistle, is a native of southeastern Eurasia. It was introduced to North America, as a contaminant of crop seed, as early as the late eighteenth century (it was declared a noxious weed in Vermont in 1795). This is an extremely aggressive plant, which spreads quickly through underground rhizomes, as well as by seed production. Canada thistle can invade undisturbed areas, as well as disturbed sites, and is also an agricultural weed. This plant invades primarily through the creeping roots, and secondarily through seedling establishment. The root system can become very extensive, growing horizontally up to 20 feet in one season. A single plant can produce up to 5300 seeds, although the average is 1500 seeds. There is usually a fairly low germination rate for the seeds, although seed has been found to remain viable for at least 26 years, and most germinating seeds develop into female plants.

DESCRIPTION: Canada thistle is an erect perennial, with a rhizomatous root system. It can be distinguished from other thistles by the creeping roots, its dense clonal growth and the small dioecious flowerheads (male and female flowers occur on separate plants). It grows from 2 to 3 feet high and blooms in mid-summer. The flowers are purple and grow in clusters. Canada thistle will grow in most habitats. The other common thistle in Whatcom County is bull thistle, which is a larger, more robust plant that lacks the creeping roots.

MANAGEMENT OPTIONS: Canada thistle is a very tenacious plant and, once established, can be difficult to eradicate. It can be controlled through mechanical, biological and chemical means, or a combination of methods. The effectiveness of control

methods can be influenced by many variables and may vary from site to site. Hand pulling can be effective only on small patches and must be conscientiously continued for several years, to finally kill out the root system. Pulling plants at bud stage is the most detrimental to the plant, as much energy has gone into bud formation; if plants are pulled later, flower heads should be destroyed to prevent seed set. Mowing can be used to control Canada thistle but should be done at least once a month throughout the growing season, and continued for several seasons. Tillage of infested areas is only effective if done repeatedly (once every 3 weeks) for at least two growing seasons. Since new plants sprout from root fragments, sporadic tilling will lead to more plants and possibly spread the infestation. Although there are several introduced biological control agents, control tends to be sporadic and localized; it often works best when at least three biocontrol agents are working together. The effectiveness of chemical control is dependent on several variables. For site-specific chemical recommendations, contact the weed control board.

