



# Whatcom Weeds

Whatcom County Noxious Weed Control Board 901 W. Smith Road Bellingham WA 98226  
(360) 354-3990 [www.co.whatcom.wa.us/publicworks/weeds](http://www.co.whatcom.wa.us/publicworks/weeds)

## ITALIAN AND SLENDERFLOWER THISTLE

*Carduus pycnocephalus* and *Carduus tenuiflorus*

**THREAT:** Italian thistle, a native of the Mediterranean area, and slenderflower thistle, a native of central Europe, are similar thistles, both known to be aggressive invaders of pastures and rangelands. So far, both of these plants have only a limited presence in Washington. Both species are on the state noxious weed list, as well as the state quarantine list (making it illegal to buy, sell or transport these plants), in an attempt to prevent any further spread of these thistles. They typically invade pastures, rangelands, right-of-ways, fallow fields and other disturbed sites, forming dense stands and out competing other vegetation. Both species reproduce only by seed. Although the seeds are primarily dispersed by the wind, they can also be spread through movement of contaminated soil and forage. The seeds have a very high germination rate and can last for at least 8 years in the soil. Hybridization between these two species may occur.

**DESCRIPTION:** Italian and slenderflower thistle are both winter annuals and are quite similar in appearance. These plants can grow up to 6 ft. tall, although usually are shorter. The green stems have spiny wings (less than ¼ inch wide in Italian and over ¼ inch wide in slenderflower). Leaves can be up to 6 inches long and have 4 to 10 lobes in Italian, and 12 to 20 lobes in slenderflower. The stems and underside of the leaves are covered with hairs. Both plants bear clusters of pinkish to purplish flowers at the end of the stem - Italian thistle has clusters of 1 to 5 flowers, while slenderflower has clusters of 5 to 15 flowers. Plants germinate in the fall, overwinter as rosettes and flower in early spring.

**MANAGEMENT OPTIONS:** Italian and slenderflower thistle can be controlled through cultural, mechanical and chemical means. Good pasture management will help prevent the establishment of these, and other, unwanted plants. Small infestations can be hand dug, as long as most of the root is removed. For larger areas, tilling is effective for killing plants, although will need to be repeated until the seedbank in the soil is exhausted. Mowing is not generally very effective in controlling these plants, as they reflower after being cut. For site-specific chemical recommendations, contact the weed control board.



Slenderflower Thistle:  
courtesy Thurston Co. NWCB



Italian Thistle

