



Whatcom Weeds

Whatcom County Noxious Weed Control Board 901 W. Smith Road Bellingham WA 98226
(360) 354-3990 www.co.whatcom.wa.us/pubwks/noxious/noxious/htm

MILK THISTLE

Silybum marianum

THREAT: Milk thistle, a native to Europe, has been used as an ornamental and medicinal plant. It has become an invasive weed in many countries of the world. Milk thistle produces a great quantity of seed, allowing it to quickly invade pastures, roadsides, ditch banks and other disturbed areas. One study showed a milk thistle plant produced an average of 6,350 seeds. Since seeds generally fall close to the parent plant, infestations can become quite dense and the spiny plants can discourage movement through infested areas. Seed can remain viable in the soil for at least nine years. This plant can be spread by vehicles, animals, agricultural products, and, occasionally as a contaminant of garden seeds. Additionally, milk thistle can cause nitrate poisoning in livestock.

DESCRIPTION: Milk thistle is a biennial or winter annual that grows up to 6 feet tall. The leaves, which are broad with lobes and bases that clasp the stems, are green with white marbling along the veins and spines on the margins. The leaves on the rosettes can be up to 20 inches long and 10 inches wide. The flowers are reddish purple, and the flowerhead is surrounded by broad, spiny, leathery bracts. Flowering occurs from late April to August. The white marbling on the leaves is quite distinctive and should serve to differentiate this plant from any other thistles.

MANAGEMENT OPTIONS: Milk thistle can be controlled through mechanical and chemical control methods. Small infestations can be dug by hand. Cultivation, followed by the planting of grass or a cover crop greatly reduces the reestablishment of milk thistle, especially if seed production has been prevented in the previous year. For site-specific chemical recommendations, contact the weed control board.

