



Whatcom Weeds

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

Onopordum acanthium

THREAT: Scotch thistle is a native of Eurasia and has become a weed in parts of North America. It produces large numbers of seeds, which are spread by wind and water. This plant is also grown as a garden ornamental, so can also be spread in this manner. Scotch thistle easily invades disturbed areas, such as roadsides, ditch banks, pastures (especially when overgrazed), campgrounds and burned areas.

DESCRIPTION: Scotch thistle is a biennial, growing up to 8 feet tall and 5 feet in diameter. In its first year of growth, the plant produces a large rosette of spiny leaves, which may be 24 inches long and 12 inches wide, but are often smaller. The tall, branching flowering stems are produced during the second growing season. The stems have broad, spiny “wings” along their length and the spiny leaves are deeply lobed and alternate. Dense, white hairs cover the leaves and stems. The flower heads form at the ends of branches and are nearly spherical. They are one to two inches in diameter, and are surrounded by spine-tipped bracts. The flowers are purple.



MANAGEMENT OPTIONS: Scotch thistle can be controlled through mechanical, cultural and chemical means. Small infestations can be dug by hand. Mowing can be used as a tool to reduce seed production, if properly timed. For grazed areas, good pasture management is important to keep weeds from invading pastures. Overgrazing should be avoided and pastures fertilized when necessary. Several herbicides are effective on Scotch thistle, especially when used at the rosette stage. Contact the weed control board for site-specific chemical recommendations.