



Canada Thistle

Cirsium arvense



Description:

A perennial that spreads primarily by a creeping root system, but also produces seed. The roots spread both horizontally and vertically underground. It grows in a wide variety of habitats. Despite its name, the plant was introduced from Europe, and is the only thistle, native or introduced, with separate male & female plants.

Stems are upright, hollow and branching near the top, up to 1.2 m tall.

Leaves are dark green and shiny on the surface and occur alternately, slightly clasping the stem. Leaf edges can vary from smooth with no spines to irregularly lobed with sharp spines.

Flowers form in clusters on small heads and are rose-purple, pink or sometimes white. Flowering occurs throughout the summer.



Control

Most of the biomass of Canada thistle plants is below ground; therefore killing the roots is the only effective control method. Cultivation only produces small root pieces that rapidly develop into new plants, and does not reach the deeper roots. Repeated mowing through the growing season gradually depletes the food energy stored in the root system as it tries to grow new shoots. For mowing to succeed, a few years of effort must be committed.

Herbicide applications generally have the same effect as mowing, by killing the shoots and drawing on root reserves, and will also require a few years commitment. A combination of spring-summer mowing, followed by herbicide application in the fall is very effective. By September the plant is preparing for dormancy by moving food reserves from the shoots down into the roots for the next growing season. Herbicide application at this time maximizes chemical translocation into the root system and results in a better kill.

A number of biological control agents have been released on Canada thistle, but a few are no longer recommended due to impacts on native thistle species. A particularly difficult weed to control, prevention and early detection are the best strategies to keep Canada thistle off your land.

