



Perennial Sowthistle

Sonchus arvensis



Description:

A perennial plant that reproduces both by seed and creeping roots (rhizomes). Seeds can germinate in spring or fall – fall seedlings overwinter as rosettes. Above ground portions of mature plants die in winter and new shoots sprout from root buds in spring. Seed production is highly variable and seeds are relatively short-lived.

Stems are upright, leafy at the base, branched in the tops and grow up to 2 m tall. Cut stems exude a milky juice.

Leaves are alternate and waxy, with weakly prickled edges and the shape is variable. Lower leaves are stalked, but clasp the stem higher up. Leaf color varies from light to dark green and they can be up to 20 cm long.

Flowers – small, yellow, dandelion-like flowers are grouped in loose clusters at the ends of stems. The bracts of the flower heads are often covered with sticky hairs. One plant may have up to 20 flower heads, but with only a few in bloom at one time.



Control

Adapted to a wide range of conditions, this plant but does best in moist, fertile soil with full sunlight. Perennial sowthistle has long been an aggressive agricultural weed, but can invade both natural and disturbed sites. It can become a serious problem in riparian areas, and chemicals from decaying sowthistles inhibit the seed germination of other species. Many native lettuces closely resemble Perennial sowthistle, but they either do not have the extensive root system or their flowers are a different color. Annual sowthistle reproduces only by seed and its flowers are smaller.

Intense cultivation over long periods can exhaust root reserves, but distribution of root pieces only increases spread. Mowing can prevent seed production, but the plant's long flowering period would necessitate many cuts.



New infestations can be managed by hand-pulling, before their extensive root systems develop. Perennial sowthistle is palatable to sheep and cattle, but overgrazing weakens the desirable, competing vegetation. Herbicide resistances are a problem with sowthistles – very high rates are required to kill the root system. A few chemicals can be effective when applied at the bud or pre-bud stage, but the waxy leaf surfaces require the use of additives to improve adhesion.

Creeping rooted perennials are always the most difficult invasive plants to control. Integrated management – a combination of control options – is the most likely route to success, but the most economical and effective tools for controlling invasive plants will always be prevention and awareness.