

ITALIAN THISTLE



Introduction

Welcome to our "Weed of the Month" feature, designed to raise awareness about the impact of noxious invasive weeds on our environment. This month, we're focusing on Italian thistle (*Carduus pycnocephalus*), an aggressive plant species that poses a significant threat to native ecosystems and agricultural lands.

Italian thistle is listed as a noxious weed in California and can be found in disturbed open sites, roadsides, pastures, annual grasslands, and waste areas. Thistles can tolerate a relatively wide range of soil types but prefer fertile, well-drained soils.

Identification & Behavior

Italian thistle belongs to the Asteraceae family which are primarily herbaceous plants. The weedy *Carduus* thistles are winter annuals or biennials with prickly leaves and stems with prickly wings. Italian thistle can reach heights of up to 6.5 feet tall and produce purple to pink, rarely white, flowers in the summer that are in the shape of a cylinder.

Italian thistle may grow as a biennial, germinating in winter to early spring and existing as a rosette until the flower stems develop in the spring to summer of the following year. After bolting, stems branch near the top. Stem leaves taper down the stem as spiny wings. These plants are slightly woolly and narrowly winged along stems and spines.

Impact

Italian thistle can lower range productivity and land value due to its ability to interfere with the delivery or supply of water for agricultural uses. The sharp spines inhibit grazing and discourage livestock and wildlife from entering infested areas. It can also dominate grassland, excluding native plants and lowering biodiversity.

Italian thistle can facilitate fire spread and frequency by providing fuels in habitats that reduce native seedling recruitment and survival.

Reproduction is only by seed. Seeds typically fall near the parent plant and are dispersed by wind which can persist in the soil for up to seven years.



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Control & Management

Mechanical control methods include pulling, cutting or disking. Manual removal or cultivation should be done when the plant is small. To control by cutting, use a sharpened shovel at the top of the root crown and cut 2 to 4 inches below the ground level to prevent resprouting from dormant auxiliary buds.

Chemical control methods should be applied in postemergence in the rosette stage or during preemergence in winter or early spring. Repeat applications may be necessary. The thistle head weevil (*Rhinocyllus conicus*) is an introduced biocontrol agent that attacks *Carduus* species and several other thistles.

Prevention

Identification is key when it comes to preventing and controlling the spread of Italian thistle. Routinely inspect and maintain your property for any signs of this invader. Be vigilant for any signs of this weed in your area and implement integrative management practices when found.

By staying informed and taking proactive measures, we can work together to curb the spread of Italian thistle (*Carduus pycnocephalus*) and protect our native ecosystems. Join us next month for a new "Weed of the Month" feature, where we'll highlight another noxious invasive plant and share tips on how to address it.

Resources

For more information about Italian thistle, visit this UC Davis Weed Research & Information Center link:

https://wric.ucdavis.edu/sites/g/files/dgvnsk15316/files/media/documents/Carduus_acanthoides-nutans-pycnocephalus-tenuiflorus.pdf

For more weed newsletters or information about our other county programs, visit our website at:

<https://www.suttercounty.org/government/county-departments/agricultural-department>



Thank you for your dedication to preserving our environment and agricultural land!
-Sutter County Agricultural Commissioner's Office