

## **A Thistle that stands out**

By Larry Hyslop



Thick stand of Scotch thistle

We are becoming inundated with weeds. Our empty lots, roadsides and rangelands are growing weeds fast enough to allow a person to watch the spread, year by year.

Among all these weeds, one stands above them all. Scotch thistle is a formidable plant, often standing five to six feet high, although capable of growth 12-feet tall. The stems are winged with spines  $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ " long. Last year's stems may be whitish and dead, but the spines remain. Leaves are covered with a thick mat of cotton-like or woolly hairs, giving them a gray-green appearance.

The thistle flowers are purple. It is also known as cotton thistle or woolly thistle. It is a native of Europe and eastern Asia and was probably brought to North America as an ornamental.

Stands of Scotch thistle can grow so thick no animal, and definitely no person, can enter. The ground beneath a thick stand is bare dirt and the thickest, tallest thistles are surrounded by shorter thistles.

Scotch thistle is a biennial plant, meaning it typically lives two years. It spends the first year as a flat rosette of long, whitish, spiked leaves. During the second year, this rosette grows into the tall thistle plant. A thick stand is usually surrounded by numerous rosettes ready to expand the thick stand next year, leaving the central stand of dead, tall thistle.

This thistle can be controlled by a multi-year attack. The best treatment targets the first year rosettes. Digging beneath the rosette snaps the taproot. By killing all rosettes means next year should not see any new, tall thistle. Goats will also eat rosettes and herbicides easily kill them.

The second year thistles can be hand-pulled, cut with a shovel, or sprayed, but it is only effective early in the growing season. I have heard of people who use tongs to grasp the flower heads with one hand as they snip it off with the other. The flower heads must be removed, just dropping them on the ground does not work. The seeds still develop a drop from the fallen head. These people drop the flower heads into a garbage bag, which is then carried away from the site. After flowering, the seeds are already on the ground so there is no point in removing the plants other than to remove the dead stalks. The next

year will see many new rosettes from the fallen seeds, which can lie dormant for several years in the soil. The rosettes are the key to stopping this invasion.

The Scotch thistle is an important emblem of Scotland. A legend says it saved a group of sleeping Scottish warriors from a group of Norse warriors who attempted to sneak up on them. The cries of pain from the invaders as they crept through thistles alerted the Scots. Anyone standing next to a Scotch thistle would have no problem believing this tale.

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