



A Northern Nevada Homeowner's Guide to Identifying and Managing Bull Thistle

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Other common names: Common thistle, spear thistle

Scientific name: *Cirsium vulgare*

Family: Asteraceae

Description: Bull thistle grows as a rosette (ground-hugging form) in the first year, and then sends up stems and flowers in the second year, growing to 6 feet tall.

Leaves: Lobed, hairy and rough on the upper side; soft on the underside, with a raised center vein. Leaves are rough when rubbed towards the base. Lobe tips have long, stiff spines. The lobe at the end of the leaf is elongated.

Stems: Hairy, spiny-winged and branched.

Flowers: Pink to purple, vase-shaped and in branched clusters at the ends of the stems. Bracts (modified leaves located under the flower petals) are spiny. Blooms from summer to fall.

Seeds: Produces many wind-borne seeds, up to 4,000 per plant.

Roots: Has a fleshy, branched taproot.

Native to: Eurasia; naturalized to much of the United States.

Where it grows: Rangeland, roadsides, edges of fields, burned areas and other disturbed or mismanaged sites

Life cycle: Biennial (flowers and dies in the second year)

Reproduction: Reproduces by seed



Typical plant growing in disturbed site.



Rosettes have fuzzy leaves with visible bumps.

Control methods: Bull thistle is easiest to control in the rosette stage. Prevent seed production to avoid spread by blowing seeds. However, simply cutting off the blooms does not provide sufficient control, as the plant will produce more flowers.

Mechanical: Dig or pull plants, removing 2 inches of the top of the root. Mowing is not effective, as the weed can regrow from the roots and bloom close to the ground.

Cultural: Plant desirable, thick stands of vegetation to compete with bull thistle. Tall grasses can help shade out the weed.

Biological: A seedhead-feeding fly, *Urophora stylata*, is available for use in controlling large infestations.

Chemical: Spot-treat young plants with broadleaf-selective herbicides. Use a surfactant to increase absorption of the herbicide by the fuzzy leaves.

References:

- Colorado State Parks. 2005. Colorado State Parks Weed Profile: Bull Thistle, <http://parks.state.co.us/SiteCollectionImages/parks/Programs/ParksResourceStewardship/Bull%20Thistle.pdf>.
- DiTomaso, J.M. and E.A. Healy. 2007. Weeds of California and Other Western States. University of California Publication 3488.
- Forest Health Staff. 2005. Bull Thistle. USDA Forest Service, <http://www.invasive.org/weedcd/pdfs/wow/bull-thistle.pdf>.
- Whitson, Tom D. (editor). 2002. Weeds of the West. University of Wyoming, Jackson, Wyoming.



The leaves are lobed and rough in texture, and the tip of the leaf is elongated. The spines on the tips of the lobes are long and stiff.



Flowers are purple and vase-shaped with spiny bracts.



Stems are spiny and winged.

(All photos by S. Donaldson)

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