



## A Northern Nevada Homeowner's Guide to Identifying and Managing Russian Thistles

Susan Donaldson, Water Quality and Weed Specialist

Wendy Hanson Mazet, Master Gardener Program Coordinator and Horticulturist

**Other common names:** Tumbleweed; barbwire tumbleweed

**Scientific name:** *Salsola tragus*; also *Salsola paulsenii*  
(barbwire Russian thistle)

**Family:** Chenopodiaceae

**Description:** Russian thistle grows into a bushy, prickly plant that breaks off at ground level and rolls with the wind when mature, spreading seeds. Barbwire Russian thistle has more spines.

**Leaves:** Mature leaves are short and stiff, with sharp spines at the leaf tip. Young leaves are soft, green, fleshy and lack spines.

**Stems:** Striped with red or purple, sometimes green.

**Flowers:** Small, green or pinkish red, and not often noticed. They occur where leaves join the stems. Blooms in late summer to fall.

**Seeds:** A single plant can produce 250,000 seeds, which require warm, disturbed soil to germinate.

**Roots:** Taproot

**Native to:** Russian and Siberia; naturalized to the drier regions of the United States

**Where it grows:** Roadsides, vacant lots, lots that have been bladed and other disturbed areas

**Life cycle:** Summer annual (sprouts in spring and summer)

**Reproduction:** Reproduces by seed



Typical plant growing in disturbed site.



Seedlings look like little pine trees.

**Control methods:** Whenever possible, control Russian thistle prior to seed formation. Removing native plant cover from a yard or building site is often followed by an infestation of Russian thistle. The dried plants are very flammable and increase the risk of wildfire. Avoiding soil disturbance and maintaining healthy plant cover are keys to decreasing infestations.

- Mechanical:** Dig, hoe or pull young seedlings. Since hoeing disturbs the soil, it may result in germination of more plants. Remove plants prior to formation of seeds. Removing mature plants spreads the seeds.
- Cultural:** Avoid disturbing the soil. Plant desirable vegetation that will compete with Russian thistle.
- Biological:** Cattle and sheep will graze young plants.
- Chemical:** Apply broadleaf-selective herbicides on very young plants. Post-emergence herbicides are not effective on mature plants. Pre-emergence herbicides can be used to manage existing seed banks.

## References:

- DiTomaso, J.M. and E.A. Healy. 2007. Weeds of California and Other Western States. University of California Publication 3488.
- UC IPM. 2010. Russian Thistle, <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7486.html>.
- VanVleet, S. 2008. Russian Thistle. Washington State University, Whitman County Extension, <http://www.whitman.wsu.edu/weeds/russianthistle.html>.
- Whitson, Tom D. (editor). 2002. Weeds of the West. University of Wyoming, Jackson, Wyoming.



**Barbwire Russian thistle is more spiny.**



**Flowers are small, green or pink, and seldom noticed.**



**Mature plants break off at ground level and tumble during fall and winter.**

*(All photos by S. Donaldson)*

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