

## common sow thistle

*Sonchus oleraceus*

### Identification:

**Asteraceae (Aster Family)**

Annual forb  
Flower: Yellow  
Blooms:  
Height:  
Width:  
Fruit:  
Leaf Arrangement:  
Fall Color:

Sow thistles in many ways look like a larger, more robust version of dandelions. They share similar yellow flowers, fluffy, wind-dispersed seeds and milky sap. Sow thistles are typically 1' to 3' tall, but sometimes as tall as 6'. The leaves of sow thistles fold at the base, clasp around the stem and curve downward, which is the best distinguishing feature of this genus. The flowers bloom any time from early summer through late fall.

Common sow thistle (*Sonchus oleraceus*) is an annual with smaller flowers, and broader leaves with deep lobes.

There are few desirable species which may be confused with sow thistle. Many "damn yellow composites" look similar to sow thistles, including lettuces (*Lactuca spp.*) and hawkbeards (*Crepis spp.*). Most of these are introduced weeds. The two exceptions are tall wild lettuce (*Lactuca canadensis*), which is a somewhat weedy native, and false dandelion (*Krigia biflora*) which is relatively rare, only being found in high-quality prairies and savannas.





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*Sonchus oleraceus*

### AKA:



**Special Concern (WI)**

### Description & Impact:

Sow thistles are common, weedy members of the sunflower family originally from Eurasia and north Africa. They have been unintentionally spread to every American state and Canadian province. Though they do not invade intact natural areas, they can be aggressive weeds of disturbed soil such as urban waste areas, roadsides and over-grazed pastures. They can be a pest in gardens, agricultural fields and new prairie plantings. If prepared correctly the leaves are edible, but are perhaps better suited as fodder for rabbits and other livestock.

### Control Methods:

Common sow thistle and spiny sow thistle are annuals. Hand pulling should be sufficient to control these on a small scale, being sure to get the entire taproot. For larger populations mow or weed-whip when they are in-bloom, and repeat as they attempt to bloom again to prevent reproduction.

Field sow thistle, being perennial, can have a more substantial, horizontally spreading root system. First-year plants can be effectively hand-pulled but established plants will quickly resprout. Repeated pulling or mowing will weaken the plant and allow neighboring plants to better compete. A careful spot-spray application of a glyphosate-based herbicide (Round-Up®, etc.) or a broadleaf specific herbicide such as triclopyr (Garlon® 3A, etc.), should kill any sow thistle in a single application, and may be necessary to eliminate field sow thistle.

Always read herbicide labels carefully before use and apply according to the instruction on the product label.

**Revegetation Recommendations:** Since this is a full-sun weed we recommend a diverse selection of prairie species to replace and compete against sow thistle in order to develop a more stable and productive plant community for the site. Contact us for specific recommendations.

### Citations: