

Weed Information Sheet:

bull thistle

Cirsium vulgare

Identification:

Asteraceae (Aster Family)

Common Biennial forb

Height: 30-60" **Width:** 12-46"

Leaf Arrangement: alternate

Flower: Indigo, Lavender

Blooms: Mid-summer to Late-

Fruit: Fluffy

Fall Color: n/a

Bull thistle is typically noticed when it bolts in its second year to 3 to 6' in height. Hairy overall, the plant is extremely well armored with spines. The leaves have deeply cut margins and sharp, stiff spines at the tip of each lobe. Flowers are clustered or solitary near the top of the plant, 1.5-2" wide, magenta, and surrounded by spiny-tipped bracts. They bloom from mid-to-late summer. It is very similar to the native pasture thistle, which, while typically found in prairie remnants, can also be found in pastures. Pasture thistle can be differentiated from all of the exotic weedy thistles by the fact that the undersides of its leaves are strikingly white in color, and it also has fewer and less stiff spines as compared to bull thistle.



bull thistle

Cirsium vulgare

AKA:



Description & Impact:

Bull Thistle is a biennial which forms a ground-hugging rosette in the first year before bolting in the second year. This member of the aster family is native to Europe, western Asia, and northern Africa, likely introduced to the eastern United States during the colonial times and the western United States in the late 1800s. It is currently found in all 50 states. This species is a prolific seeder and can spread rapidly in disturbed areas, making it common in pastures, roadsides, old fields, weedy prairies and waste areas.

Control Methods:

Since these plants only live for two years, the primary goal of management should be to prevent seed production. Once flowering has begun they can produce seeds even if you kill the plant.

Manual Control: Hand-pulling is not practical; the plants can only be handled with thick leather gloves and the root usually breaks off near the surface allowing the plant to re-sprout later. Cutting the root about 3" below the surface with a sharp shovel or "Parsnip Predator", and then pulling the plant out is effective for small populations. This is best done before they flower, otherwise the flower heads (or entire plant) will need to be removed and disposed of. Mowing during the flowering period can be effective, but bull thistle will typically resprout and to re-flower, so repeated mowings are needed until the tap root is exhausted.

Herbicide: We recommend a foliar application of glyphosate (Round-Up®) due to its rapid break down and low residual activity, or triclopyr (Garlon® 3A) which is more selective and will not kill grasses. Overall, we recommend seeking out and treating these plants before they bolt. However herbicide can also be applied on second year plants before the flowers have opened. If the plants have already begun flowering, cutting or mowing can set them back again so that herbicides can be applied later. Fall herbicide application can be done even after the first hard frost if the plants still appear lively and the temperature is above 40°F. Always carefully read herbicide labels carefully before use and apply according to the instruction on the product label.

Citations: