

© Bruce Ackley, OH State University

Musk thistle *Carduus nutans* L. is a non-native biennial forb that reproduces solely by seed. During the first year of growth, a rosette forms in spring or fall. During the second year in mid to late spring, the stem bolts, flowers, sets seed, and the plant dies.

Musk thistle can grow up to 6 feet tall. The leaves have spines, are waxy, and dark green in color with a prominent light green to white midrib that can be seen from a distance. Leaves are dentately lobed; leaf bases sometimes extend down below the point of attachment. The terminal flower heads are purple, large in size (1.5 to 3 inches in diameter) and bend over as if nodding. These flower heads are made up of only disk flowers. They are surrounded by numerous, wide and stout lance-shaped, spine-tipped bracts that resemble an open pineapple. The pappus has

plumose bristles that appear barbed under magnification. Musk thistle produces many flower heads. The tallest shoots flower first; lateral shoots develop in leaf axils. A robust plant may produce 100 or more flowering heads. Reproduction is usually via out-crossing through insect pollination, but self-pollination also occurs. Flowers emerge in May through September. Seeds develop shortly after flowers emerge. Flower buds can contain viable seeds from self-pollination. Seeds can mature on severed bud and flower-heads. Seeds remain viable in the soil for up to about 14 years. Seeds can germinate and emerge from spring through fall.

Musk thistle habitat is found in a variety of environments extending from shortgrass prairie to alpine. It is strongly associated with heavily disturbed sites, where over-use occurs or where site conditions are poor due to land management practices. This includes over-grazed areas, large fires, trails, ditches and roadsides. Infested livestock pastures suffer from significantly decreased carrying capacity.

Because musk thistle reproduces solely from seed, the key for successful management is to prevent seed production. Once flowers emerge and start to produce seed, effective management options will become limited. Once sites are infested, musk thistle can form dense stands. Prevention, adjusting land management practices, a robust integrated treatment plan and restoration are critical to eliminating this species.

restoration are critical to eliminating this species.

Musk thistle is designated as a "List B" species in the Colorado Noxious Weed Act. It is required to be eradicated; some populations may be contained or suppressed depending on state regulations. For management directions for each county, refer to the most recent Rule, or visit www.colorado.gov/ag/weedcontacts for details.



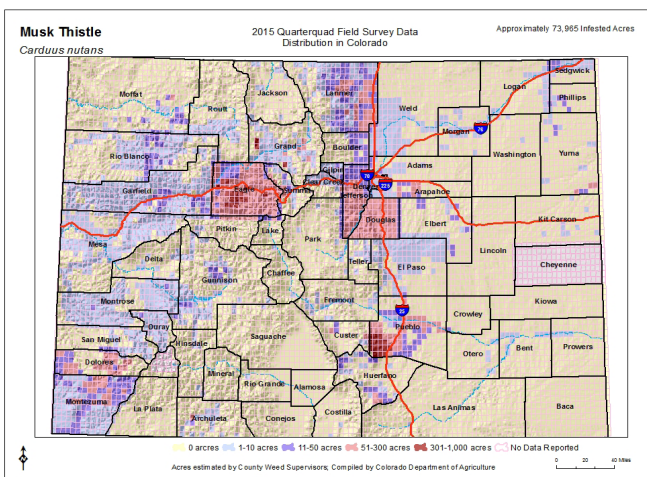
© Chris Evans, University of IL



© Les Mehrhoff, DiscoverLife.org



2015 Quarter Quad Survey



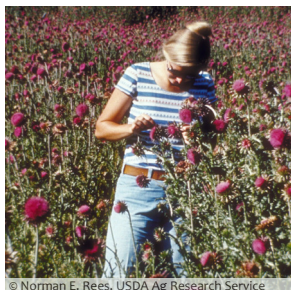
Key ID Points

1. Leaf with white midrib and leaf margins with spines.
2. Pappus with plumose barbed bristles.
3. Wide, stout lance-shaped bracts with spiny tips.

Musk thistle
Carduus nutans L.

Integrated Weed Management Recommendations

Effective integrated management means using a variety of eradication methods that also includes restoration, prevention of seed production and dispersal, and monitoring. Maintain robust healthy native landscapes and restore degraded sites. Avoid soil disturbance. As with most biennials, prevent seed production in the first and second year of musk thistle growth. Prevent seed from dispersing, such as on contaminated equipment. Rest sites until they are effectively restored. Change land use practices. Use methods appropriate for the site.



© Norman E. Rees, USDA Ag Research Service

CULTURAL CONTROL METHODS

Musk thistle is not tolerant of competition and needs light to germinate seeds. Cultural methods should aim to maintain or restore a competitive assemblage of forbs, cool and warm season grasses. Implement whole site restoration of soils, plants and water regimes where stands of musk thistle exist where needed. Use locally adapted species that are ecologically appropriate for the site to improve competitiveness. Include annual as well as perennial species. Incorporate soil amendments, soil microbes and mycorrhizal fungi in restoration and land management efforts. Minimize soil compaction and disturbance, especially in wetlands and moist soil. Irrigation can increase competitive species.



© Eric Coombs, OR Dept of Agriculture

BIOLOGICAL CONTROL METHODS

Although horses, cattle, goats and sheep may eat flower heads on a few plants, seeds pass through their digestive tracks unaltered and spread. The leaf and stalk spines can cause domestic livestock to avoid mature musk thistle. Thus, musk thistle can become an “increaser” in over-grazed systems. Properly managed grazing can improve vigor of desired species and indirectly reduce musk thistle. *Trichosirocalus horridus* is the only biological control agent available for musk thistle in Colorado. The other species, *Rhinocyllus conicus*, is not host specific and will damage native thistles, and therefore cannot be released as an agent in Colorado. For more information, visit the Colorado Department of Agriculture’s Palisade Insectary website at www.colorado.gov/ag/biocontrol.



© Friends of NV Wilderness Stewardship Team

MECHANICAL CONTROL METHODS

Methods, such as tilling, hoeing and digging, are best for infestations smaller than 0.5 acres; weigh this against other plants present, ecology and site condition. Sever roots below the soil surface during the first year before the plant stores energy, and in the second year before flower production. Mowing, chopping and deadheading stimulates more flower production; these methods require consecutive years of season-long treatments. All flowerbuds and heads must be collected, bagged, and disposed of or destroyed; seeds will mature and germinate if left on the ground. Prescribed fire that results in high soil burn severity damage roots and above ground biomass, but is not recommended due to impacts on desired plants. Fire generally favors musk thistle germination.

CHEMICAL

NOTE: The following are recommendations for herbicides that can be applied to pastures and rangeland. Rates are approximate and based on equipment with an output of 30 gal/acre. Follow the label for exact rates. Always read, understand, and follow the label directions. The herbicide label is the LAW!

HERBICIDE	RATE	APPLICATION TIMING
Aminopyralid* (Milestone)	6 oz./acre + 0.25% v/v non-ionic surfactant	Apply in spring rosette to early bolting growth stages or in fall to rosettes. *Product not permitted for use in the San Luis Valley.
Chlorsulfuron** (Telar)	1-2.6 oz. product/ acre + 0.25% v/v non-ionic surfactant	Apply in spring from rosette through very early flower growth stages. (Can prevent viable seed formation if applied no later than the first viable flowers begin to open.) **This herbicide has residual soil activity that will affect all broadleaf seedlings germinating after application has occurred.
Clopyralid (Transline)	0.67-1.33 pints product/acre + 0.25% v/v non- ionic surfactant	Apply to rosettes through flower bud stage in spring, or to fall rosettes.

Musk thistle

Carduus nutans L.



Colorado Department of Agriculture - Conservation Services

305 Interlocken Parkway

Broomfield, CO 80021

(303) 869-9030

www.colorado.gov/ag/weeds

