



# FACT SHEET

## MILK THISTLE (*Silybum marianum*)

- Milk thistle grows up to six feet tall and can form dense stands.
- The rosette leaves are large, up to 20 inches long. Rosettes can reach 3 feet in diameter.
- The leaves are dark green with distinctive white marbling. The leaf edges have spines up to ½ inch long.
- The purple flowers are solitary and spiny.
- The seeds are dark brown and about ½ inch long.
- Sunflower family.



### DISTRIBUTION:

Milk thistle has a very limited distribution in Washington State but it has been found (and controlled) on two sites in Port Townsend. In the past it was grown for medicinal use and is still occasionally found in gardens. However, it is illegal to sell or buy milk thistle in Washington State and all existing plantings have to be removed, since milk thistle is a Class A Noxious Weed.

### WHY BE CONCERNED?

- Toxic to livestock when consumed in large quantities.
- The spines can cause injury to livestock.
- Forms dense stands in pastures and rangelands, crowding out crops or forage plants.

Please inform the Weed Board if you think you see this plant.

It is a [Class A Noxious Weed](#), meaning that eradication is required.

## ECOLOGY:

- Milk thistle is a tap-rooted plant that can grow as a winter annual or a biennial.
- It can flower from April to October.
- It reproduces by seed. Plants that go to seed die at the end of the season.
- Seeds can remain viable for at least 9 years and they can germinate throughout the year in Western Washington.

## CONTROL

### Prevention and early detection are the best means of control!

- **Do not plant milk thistle.**
- **Use** weed free hay and seed; avoid introducing weed contaminated soil.
- **Clean** equipment that has been used in infested areas.
- **Remove** seedlings when young; newly established plants can usually be pulled easily and there are no seeds to worry about.
- **Dispose** of weeds properly, bag or burn flower or seed heads.
- **Monitor** the site for several years; promptly remove new seedlings.

**HANDPULLING** or digging milk thistle can be successful. The leaves are very distinctive so plants can be identified before they flower, which is the best time to pull them. If this opportunity is missed and plants are pulled when they have flowers or buds, the flowerheads should be clipped, bagged and disposed of in the trash because flowers can continue developing and produce seeds. If the plants are in seed, it is very difficult to bag the seed heads without dispersing the seeds. In these cases, carefully cut off the seed head and place in a bag to prevent seed dispersion.

**MOWING** will **not** eradicate milk thistle effectively because plants are able to re-sprout and flower again in the same season after being mowed. Plants that are regularly mowed can persist as short-lived perennials or can flower below the level of the mower. Milk thistle plants that are pushed over by the tires of the tractor will often still go to flower.

**HERBICIDES** can be effective, but should always be applied with care. Do not apply herbicides over or near water bodies. Read the label to check that you are applying a herbicide in the right place, to the right plant, at the right time, and in the right amount. If spraying milk thistle in a grassy area, it is best to use a selective herbicide that will not harm grass. For biennial plants, the best time to apply herbicide is in the spring, before plants bolt (send up the elongated flowering stem). However, herbicides are more effective in warm temperatures, so timing is important.

**Call the Weed Board for specific herbicide advice.**