

If you would like weed identification, site-specific control recommendations or additional noxious weed information, contact the San Juan County Noxious Weed Control Program.



San Juan County Noxious Weed Control Program 2014

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Thanks to Dr. Eugene Kozloff

Bull Thistle

(Cirsium vulgare)

Class C noxious weed

(Control encouraged but not
required by law)



Photo credit: SJCNWCP

About bull thistle:

Bull thistle is a non-native upright biennial or monocarpic perennial (individual plants that die after setting seed). In the first year it forms a large, spiny-leaved rosette. This rosette overwinters then bolts up to seven feet tall to produce one to several flowering stems, with various amount of branching the following year. Most plants remain in the rosette stage for one year. Some individuals, however, may bolt, flower, and set seed in one year while others may not bolt for three or more years.

Bull thistle's spiny-winged stems and large globe-shaped flower heads (one to two inches wide) help to differentiate it from Canada thistle with its less spiny stems and smaller urn-shaped flower heads (up to 3/4 inches wide). Bull thistle has a fleshy taproot, Canada thistle roots are an extensive system of lateral rhizomes. Bull thistle reproduces solely by seed, while Canada thistle reproduces primarily vegetatively by rhizomes, and only secondarily by seed.

Why control bull thistle?

Bull thistle delays reforestation and reduces crop yield by competing for light, moisture and nutrients. Its mature, prickly leaves will irritate the mouths of most grazing animals.

Tools for bull thistle removal:

- Work gloves
- Spading fork or shovel
- Mower or string trimmer
- Pruning shears and plastic bag
- Herbicide and equipment if needed

Bull Thistle Control

By law, herbicides must be used in strict accordance with label instructions..

To eliminate bull thistle infestations, limit bare soil and prevent plants from going to seed.

Mechanical Control:

Seedlings & rosettes: Pull, flame* or hoe emerging seedlings. The larger rosettes can be uprooted using a spading fork when the soil is moist.

Tight bud stage: Mow close to, or preferably cut below, the soil surface at the tight bud stage. A second sweep through about a month later should kill most of the plants and prevent the rest from flowering. If cut too early, plants will resprout and flower. If cut too late, seeds may be released from cut flower heads five to ten days after opening.

Flowering stage: Remove and bag flowering heads. Cut or mow remaining stalks.

Targeted Grazing:

Goats may help control thistle. However, poor pasture management and over grazing will lead to greater infestation of thistle.

Chemical Control:

If herbicides prove necessary, the best time to treat bull thistle is in the fall or early spring while in the rosette form, the soil is moist and the plant is not drought-stressed. Plants can be spot-sprayed or wicked using glyphosate, Milestone®, 2,4D or triclopyr.

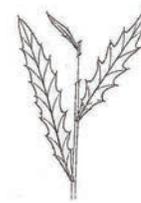
* Small rosettes can be treated with a hand torch when ground is wet and the surrounding area is clear of native or ornamental plantings.

What to do with the remains:

If cut before flowering, the entire plant can be composted or left to decompose. If flowering, cut and bag the heads and put them in the trash. The rest of the plant can be left to decompose. Pulled rosettes may have seed-laden dirt attached to their roots and should be piled separately.

To help prevent further infestations:

Establish dense, competitive native or other non-invasive vegetation, monitor the site, and request weed-free seed and top soil. Purchase weed-free-hay. For best pasture management practices contact the WSU Cooperative Extension (378-4414) or San Juan Islands Conservation District (378-6621).



Canada thistle



Bull thistle



Indian thistle

Bull thistle vs native thistle:

More than 140 thistle species are indigenous to North America. One of these, our locally native, Indian or short-style thistle (*Cirsium brevistylum*), can be confused with bull thistle. Both have large flower heads and can reach over six feet in height. Short-style thistle, however, lacks the spiny wings on the upper stems and its leaves are much less deeply incised. The native thistle is more shade tolerant than bull thistle and plays a vital role in the ecosystem, providing food for native butterflies and birds.