

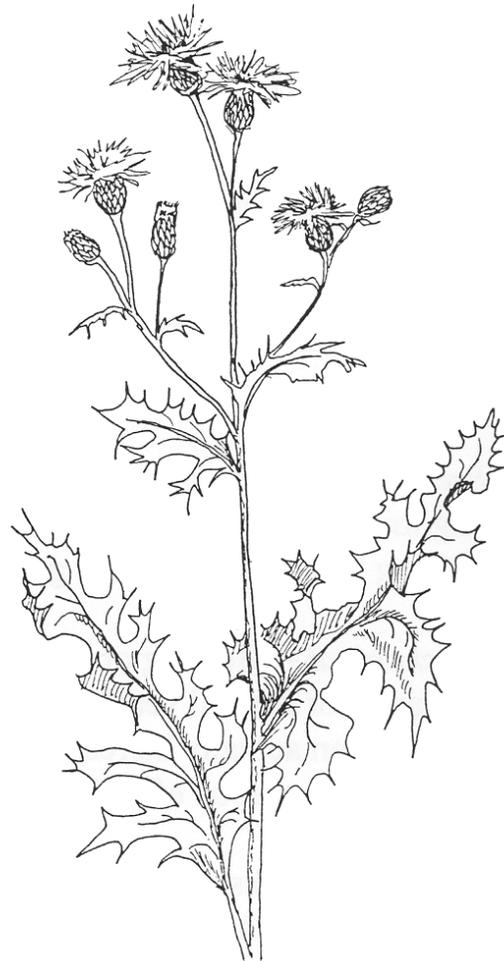
Weeds in the Garden

Canada Thistle

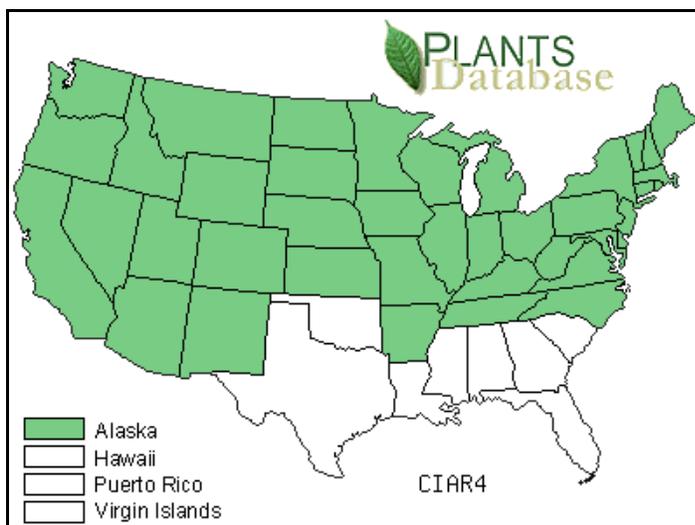
Common Name: Canada thistle

Scientific Name: *Cirsium arvense*

Characteristics: Unlike its native thistle cousins (which are annuals), Canada thistle is a perennial forb. Its leaves grow in a rosette formation and it can reach two to five feet tall at maturity. The plants often grow in circles radiating out from an original plant. These “colonies” can be made up of only male or female plants. Plant stems are hairy, the leaves are smooth and are characterized by crinkled edges with numerous spines along the margins. Flowers bloom in late summer. The purple heads about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch in size and have a strong fragrance. A “parachute” of tan hair attached at the tip disperses the seeds.



Current Range: Found throughout much of the United States.



Origin: Contrary to its name, Canada thistle is a native to Europe. The word “thistle” derives from the Dutch word “distel” which means sharp.

“Look Alikes”: Species such as tall thistle, field thistle, bull or musk thistle can be confused with Canada thistle. Canada thistle can be identified by its relatively small flower head (less than one inch in diameter). Other thistle species have larger flower heads.

Habitat: Canada thistle grows in disturbed areas and in a variety of soil types. It prefers well-drained soils, but can grow in wet areas such as ditches or stream banks. It is commonly found in old pastures, orchards or agricultural lands.

The Problem: Canada thistle is most problematic in agricultural or disturbed areas. It grows in clonal patches of all male or all female plants and so only some patches produce seeds. Seeds mature quickly and can even mature if the flower heads are cut and not destroyed. Seeds may remain viable for up to 20 years and they are easily dispersed by wind. The roots of the thistle can spread ten to twelve feet and can grow to more than six feet deep. Thistle infestations can be made worse by plowing, as each fragmented rhizome can grow into a new plant. The invasive clonal patches can rapidly take over valuable grazing lands and fields. Most livestock will not forage on the spiny plants.

Solutions:

Prevention – Education and citizen awareness can play a huge role in controlling this exotic species. Gardeners and landscapers can slow its spread by removing thistles from yards, gardens and roadsides.

Mechanical – Mowing or cutting during the early bud stage can be effective if repeated for several years. Late spring burns can be helpful – but early spring burning can actually increase sprouting. For light to moderate infestations, hand pulling can be effective.

Chemical – Infested lands not considered as high quality natural areas can be treated with an application of Glyphosate to the leaves in spring when the plants are six to ten inches tall. Prior to use of chemical herbicides, it is important to consult with local natural resource staff to determine which herbicides would be the most effective and would have the least impact on native species. It is essential to follow safety instructions on the selected product.

**For more information please contact the
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