

Canada Thistle

Cirsium arvense

Canada thistle is native to Europe, Northern Africa, and Western Asia. It was one of the first weeds brought to North America by early European settlers. This invasive plant can be found in cultivated fields, pastures, roadsides, riverbanks and any disturbed areas. These plants are well adapted to a wide variety of soil types including clay loam, sandy loam, rich, and heavy soils.



Canada thistle is a spiny perennial that can grow 0.3 - 2 m tall. Their flowers are white to purple in colour and grow in clusters of 1 - 5. They can be differentiated from native thistle species as their stems are smooth. The seeds are dandelion-like, light brown in colour, and oblong in shape. The leaves of this plant are glossy green with sharp spiny edges and have white undersides. Another key identifying feature are their extensive horizontal roots that can spread up to 6 m.

There are several ways to remove Canada thistle. When removing the plants minimize the soil disturbances so that new root fragments are not created. When they are in their flowering stage it is important that their flowers are removed before they turn to seed. Plants should be covered or bagged and transported to the landfill. It is important to never compost Canada thistle as their seeds remain viable for a long time and can continue to spread.



Canada thistle spreads through seed and through their horizontal roots. The plants form thick infestations through their rhizomes that crowd out surrounding vegetation. One plant produces 1000-1500 seeds per shoot and these seeds can lay dormant and stay viable for up to 20 years. New plants can form through root fragments. Their seeds are dispersed by wind, but humans can unknowingly spread the invasive plant as the seeds can stick to clothing, vehicles, and equipment.

There are native prairie species that can compete with the dense growth of Canada thistle. These include; Goldenrods, Asters, Joe-Pye Weed, and Wild Bergamot.

