

WOOLLY DISTAFF THISTLE



Introduction

Welcome to our "Weed of the Month" feature, designed to raise awareness about the impact of noxious invasive weeds on our environment. This month, we're focusing on Woolly distaff thistle (*Carthamus lanatus*), an aggressive plant species that poses a significant threat to native ecosystems and agricultural lands.

Woolly distaff thistle has been found in Oregon, Arizona, Texas and Oklahoma. Within California, occurrences have been reported in neighboring counties, including Yolo County and Nevada County, highlighting the importance of early management efforts to limit further spread.

Identification & Behavior

Woolly distaff thistle is an erect winter annual with rigid stems that can grow 3 ft tall. The stems are usually covered with loose woolly or cobweb hairs, especially in leaf axils and at the bases of flowerheads. Plants exist as rosettes until the flower stems develop, usually between spring and summer months.

Flowerheads are yellow, 1 to 2 inches long, solitary at stem tips, with spiny lobed phyllaries. Outer seeds (achenes) lack a pappus, whereas inner achenes have a persistent pappus of numerous narrow, unequal brownish scales. Most achenes fall near the parent plant, but some remain in the persistent seedheads. Woolly distaff thistle can be found in disturbed open sites, roadsides, pastures, annual grasslands, and waste areas.

Impact

Woolly distaff thistle is highly competitive with cereal crops and desirable rangeland species. Plants reproduce only by seed. Achenes and sometimes entire seedheads can disperse to greater distances with animals, humans, machinery such as tractors and agricultural implements, mud and water.

The spiny foliage and flowerheads can injure the eyes and mouths of grazing livestock. Most seeds germinate within the first couple of years after maturation, but some seeds can remain dormant and viable for up to 8 years under field conditions.

Top left: Woolly distaff thistle

Middle: Woolly distaff thistle leaves

Right: Woolly distaff thistle flowerhead

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Control & Management

Mechanical control methods include pulling, cutting and disking.

Hoeing can be effective for the control of small populations. This can be conducted in the rosette or bolting stage, but before flowering. Plants must be cut just below the soil surface to prevent resprouting.

Mowing after bolting, but before the development of flower buds, can also prevent seed production.

Chemical control can be applied as a postemergence treatment when plants are at seedling or early rosette stage. This is generally in late winter or early spring.

Prevention

Identification is key when it comes to preventing and controlling the spread of Woolly distaff thistle. Routinely inspect and maintain your property for any signs of this invader. Be vigilant for any signs of this weed in your area and report sightings to the Sutter County Agricultural Commissioner's Office at (530) 822-7500.

By staying informed and taking proactive measures, we can work together to curb the spread of Woolly distaff thistle (*Carthamus lanatus*) and protect our native ecosystems. Join us next month for a new "Weed of the Month" feature, where we'll highlight another noxious invasive plant and share tips on how to address it.

Resources

For more information about Woolly distaff thistle, visit the California Invasive Plant Council website at:

<https://www.cal-ipc.org/plants/profile/carthamus-lanatus-profile/>

For more weed newsletters or information about our other county programs, visit our website at:

<https://www.suttercounty.org/government/county-departments/agricultural-department>



Thank you for your dedication to preserving our environment and agricultural land!

-Sutter County Agricultural Commissioner's Office