

Noxious Weeds of Nebraska

# Musk Thistle

Fred Roeth, Extension Weeds Specialist  
Steve Melvin, Extension Educator, Frontier County  
Irvin Schleufer, Agricultural Research Technician



Biology  
Identification  
Distribution  
Control

# Musk Thistle

Musk thistle (*Carduus nutans* L.) is an introduced invasive broadleaf weed native to Europe, North Africa, and Asia. In these areas it is a minor weed because natural enemies keep its population low. When the plant was introduced into North America, its natural enemies were left behind. Without these natural



Figure 1. Dense patch of musk thistle.

checks, the thistle is able to thrive and compete with native vegetation.

Musk thistles aggressively invade all lands in Nebraska. Typical cropland weed control methods are very effective against them; however, land with permanent cover (pasture, range, roadway ditches and wasteland) that is not tilled or treated with a herbicide can develop a serious infestation. In pasture and rangelands thistles compete for the moisture, sunlight, and nutrients needed to produce forage for livestock. Musk thistle is not a poisonous plant; however, livestock will refuse to enter heavily infested areas and will not graze close to the spiny plants (Figure 1). On roadways and wastelands musk thistle does not provide sufficient protection from soil erosion, crowds out desirable vegetation, is unsightly, hinders movement of people and wildlife, and produces seed that infests surrounding areas.

## Biology

Although classified as a biennial plant, opportunistic might be a better descriptor because musk thistle can behave as an annual or a winter annual depending on the growing conditions (see *Life Cycle*, page 5). Although it regenerates only from seed, seedlings can emerge anytime during the growing season. Germination is strongly enhanced by light. Optimum germination occurs in moist soils at 59° to 68° F in light and 68° to 86° F in the dark. Behaving mainly as a biennial plant, in the fall seedlings form rosettes which overwinter and begin bolting (seed stalk production) about May 1. A musk thistle rosette is a cluster of leaves in circular form that grows flat on the ground without an upright stem (Figure 2). A bolted plant is one that has developed an upright stem (Figure 3). Blooming starts with the terminal head at the top of the plant about the first week in June and progresses to the lower branches over six to eight weeks.

Musk thistle is a prolific seed producer. Large, extensively branched plants in sparse stands may have 100 or more heads with a total production of about 20,000 seeds. The main terminal heads on the upper branches bear the bulk of the plump, well-filled seeds. Individual terminal heads can have as many as 1,500 seeds, each a little over 1/8 inch long (Figure 4). Seed germination may run as high as 95 percent shortly after dissemination and most germinate in the first year; nonetheless, some will remain viable for more than 10 years in the soil.

Seeds are dispersed by wind, small mammals, birds, and water. A field study on the effects of wind speed on musk thistle seed dispersal showed that seed attached to pappus can travel up to 330 feet at wind speeds of 12 miles per hour (Figure 5). A computer model based on this field trial indicates that less than 1 percent of musk thistle seeds are blown more than 330 feet, and more than 80 percent of seeds are deposited less than 130 feet from the release point. Less than five percent of seed remains attached to the pappus when it breaks from the flower head so most thistle pappus floating in the wind do not bear seed.

## History

Early American records are scarce and give little clue as to when and where musk thistle first became established on this continent. The earliest known collections made from 1852 to 1869 by T. C. Porter near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, reported musk thistle plants.

Musk thistle, also known as nodding thistle, is now naturalized throughout most of the United States and southern Canada. It occurs from Nova Scotia west to British Columbia, south to California, and east to Georgia.

In Nebraska, musk thistle was not found in extensive plant collections made during the late 1920s and 1930s; however, in 1932 a specimen was brought to a field day in Seward County for identification. It was recorded near Dawson in Richardson County during a 1940-41 botanical survey. These scattered reports, references, and collections indicate that sometime between 1945 and 1950 musk thistle emerged as a weed species of economic importance in Nebraska. By 1959 it was such a pest in eastern Nebraska pastures and waste areas that the Nebraska Legislature declared musk thistle a noxious weed and required all landowners to prevent seed production on their lands.

# Identification

Leaves of both rosettes and bolted plants are deeply cut (segmented) and dark green with a light green midrib. There is a grayish-green area at the outer edge of each spine-tipped leaf segment (Figure 6). Each lobe has three to five points that end in a white or yellowish spine. The leaves extend onto the stem, giving it a winged or frilled appearance. The leaves and stem are relatively free of hair. Seedlings emerge as only a single leaf and grow into rosettes that can reach over 2 feet in diameter. Mature plant heights are typically 5 to 7 feet with a long, fleshy taproot.

Musk thistle has deep reddish purple flowers that are large (up to 3 inches in diameter) and attractive. The head is solitary on the end of the stem and nods or hangs down as it grows in size (Figure 7).

A close relative, the plumeless thistle (*Carduus acanthoides* L.), is also found in Nebraska. The general appearance of plumeless thistle is similar to musk thistle (Figure 8). The distinguishing characteristics are that plumeless thistle heads are smaller and plumeless leaves are more finely cut with sparsely to noticeably hairy areas, particularly along the leaf veins and stems (Figure 6).



Figure 2. Musk thistle rosettes can smother other vegetation.



Figure 3. Musk thistle in early bolting stage.



Figure 4. Musk thistle seeds are light tan. One plant produces 10,000 to 20,000 seeds.



Figure 5. Musk thistle seeds are dispersed by wind-blown pappus.



Figure 6. Leaves of the plumeless thistle (left) and musk thistle are compared. Musk thistle leaves have deep segmentation and spiny tips.



Figure 7. Musk thistle flower heads are pink to purple and showy.



Figure 8. Plumeless thistle (left) and musk thistle (right) in early bloom.

# Control Methods

Musk thistle will be a part of Nebraska's flora for the foreseeable future and will continue to infest areas that are not managed to prevent invasion. Natural predators of musk thistle in its native countries of origin continue to be evaluated for control. Biological control methods, such as the use of livestock, insects, pathogens, and parasites, hold much promise for controlling noxious and invasive weeds.

A management plan should include a combination of cultural, mechanical, chemical, and biological control methods. Its primary goals should be to discourage establishment by encouraging vigorous competition of the desirable species and to prevent seed production by existing plants. Most pasture weeds gain their foothold because the desirable species are overgrazed. County Weed Control Authorities enforce the Noxious Weed Law through survey, notification, and supervision of control efforts. The thistles growing in a pasture most likely

originated from seed produced nearby because 80 percent of the seed will drop within 130 feet of the plant that produced it.

## Cultural

Cultural controls are some of the most important methods available because they are a win-win situation: musk thistle and other weeds are controlled and forage production is increased. Cultural control methods include: maintaining desirable plants that are vigorous and competitive; preventing seed from getting into the area; maintaining a good soil fertility program; using controlled multispecies grazing (grazing with cattle, sheep, goats, etc.), and conducting prescribed burns.

A vigorous, thick perennial plant community is a difficult place for musk thistle seedlings to establish. A well-managed pasture produces more forage and competes vigorously with the few weeds that do get established. Researchers have shown that musk thistle growing in an area where surrounding vegetation had been removed produced 10 times as many flowering heads and

grew almost twice as tall as thistles in an average pasture. The backbone of a good control program is encouraging vigorous growth of desirable plants.

Excess soil fertility can aid musk thistle seedling establishment. Use fertilizer only when needed and at rates based on soil tests so the fertilizer is used by the desired plants.

Multispecies grazing works well to control many of the plants that cattle do not like to eat. Some producers claim that goats, horses, and donkeys will graze on musk thistles; however, no research is available to confirm these claims.

Prescribed burning does not directly control musk thistle but can make controls more effective. It is important to burn at the proper time for the grasses in the pasture and apply herbicide about 10 to 14 days after the thistles have recovered and are growing well. Prescribed burning may stimulate new grass seedlings and tillers which can thicken the grass and increase competition in future years.

## Mechanical

Mechanical control such as hand digging, cutting heads, mowing, or shredding is effective after the musk thistle has reached the bud or bloom stage. Hand cutting musk thistle plants below the crown (1 to 2 inches below the soil surface where the root diameter narrows from the crown) is a very cost-effective way to remove scattered plants or a few missed by a broadcast spray. A sharp shovel, spade, or heavy hoe works well. Heads that are past full flower and have started to lose their purple color will still produce some viable seed if left attached to the stalk. Flowering heads that are removed should be placed in a closed container and either burned or allowed to rot to destroy seed viability.

If an infested area is accessible to equipment, mowing or shredding will temporarily prevent seed production. Timing is very important for this method (Figures 10, 11). Plants should be mowed in the early-bloom stage so they will not produce viable seed. Musk thistle plants which are mowed before blooming can regenerate stalks from crown buds which will necessitate addi-

# Distribution

Musk thistle is found throughout Nebraska (Figure 9), especially in central and eastern parts of the state and in isolated pockets in the Sandhills. Usually cropland does not become infested because tillage and other weed control methods are applied annually; however, land with permanent cover (range, pastures, roadway ditches and wastelands) can develop serious infestations. Occasionally fall sown wheat, rye, barley, no-till fields, and established alfalfa can develop problems and should be scouted in spring to determine if treatment is necessary. The Nebraska Crop Improvement Association has rejected winter wheat fields for certification because of musk thistle.

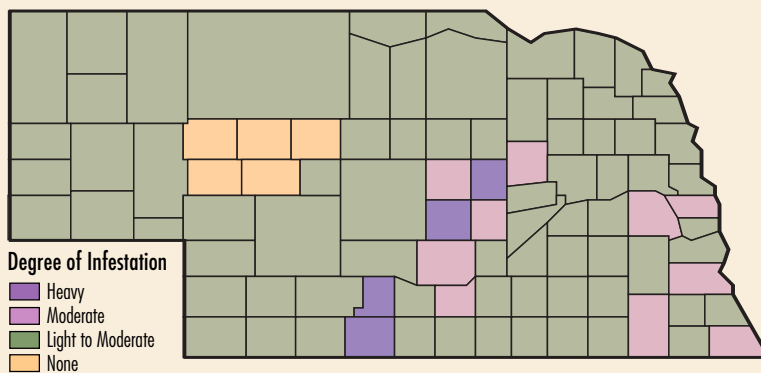


Figure 9. Distribution of musk thistle in the state's 93 counties.

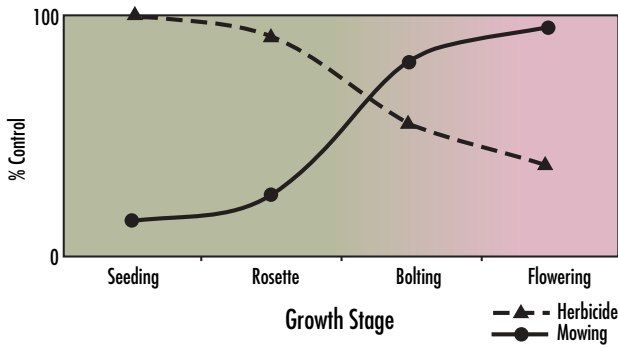


Figure 10. Musk thistle control with herbicides or mowing as affected by growth stage.

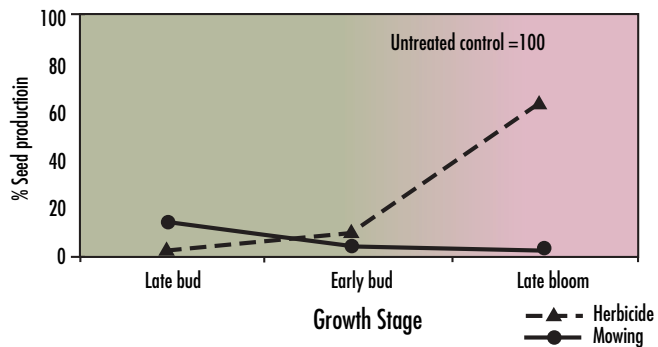


Figure 11. Musk thistle seed production as affected by mowing or herbicide treatment at various life cycle growth stages.

tional mowings. Mowing will be less likely than shredding to harm any musk thistle seed weevil pupae present in the seed heads.

### Biological

Biological control refers to using living organisms as natural enemies to control pests. The purpose of introducing biological control agents is to create the natural checks and balances that control exotic weeds in their native habitats. Without these natural checks, musk thistle is more prolific and competitive.

Researchers have investigated several insects and pathogens for the control of musk thistle and some have been introduced into the United States. Biological control agents used today in Nebraska include three insects: the musk thistle head weevil (*Rhinocyllus conicus*), musk thistle rosette weevil (*Trichosiocalus horridus*), musk thistle tortoise beetle (*Cassida rubiginosa*) and one pathogen, a rust fungus (*Puccinia carduorum*). Only the head weevil is well established across the state.

The musk thistle head weevil (*Rhinocyllus conicus*) was introduced into

the United States from southern Europe in 1969 and has been successfully released in Nebraska. The weevils overwinter as adults with one generation per year (Figure 12a). In mid-May to mid-June the adults congregate on bolting musk thistle plants, feed, mate, and deposit eggs on the flower buds (Figure 12b). The eggs hatch and larvae burrow into the flower and interfere with seed production and viability (Figure 12c).

The musk thistle rosette weevil (*Trichosiocalus horridus*) feeds on the center of the rosettes, causing the plant to die or have multiple stems and



Figure 12a. Musk thistle head weevil adult.



Figure 12c. Flower head damage caused by the musk thistle weevil.

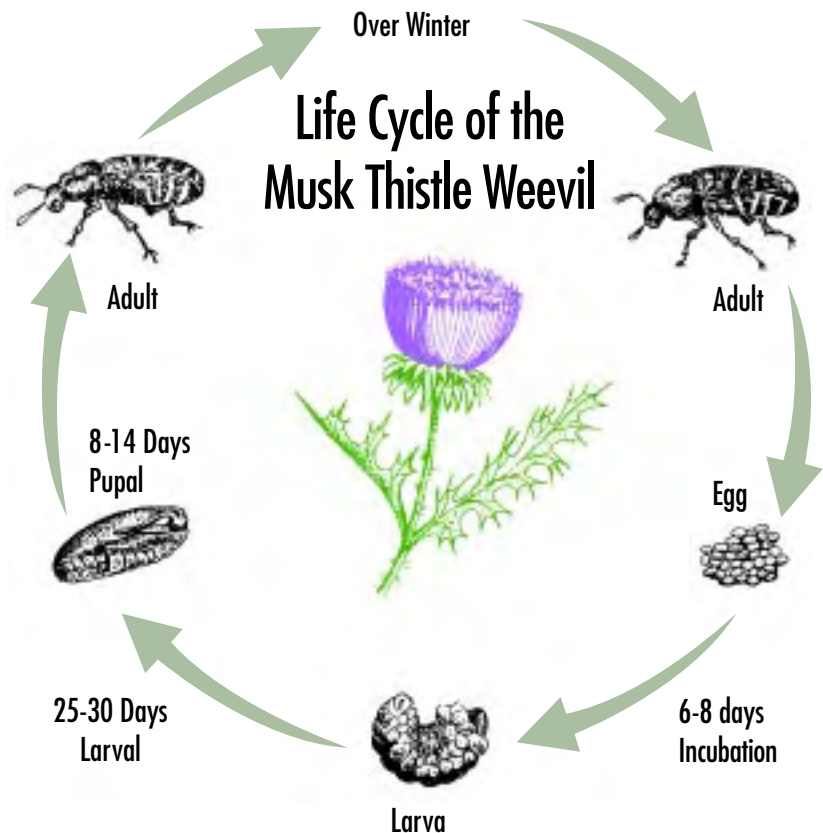
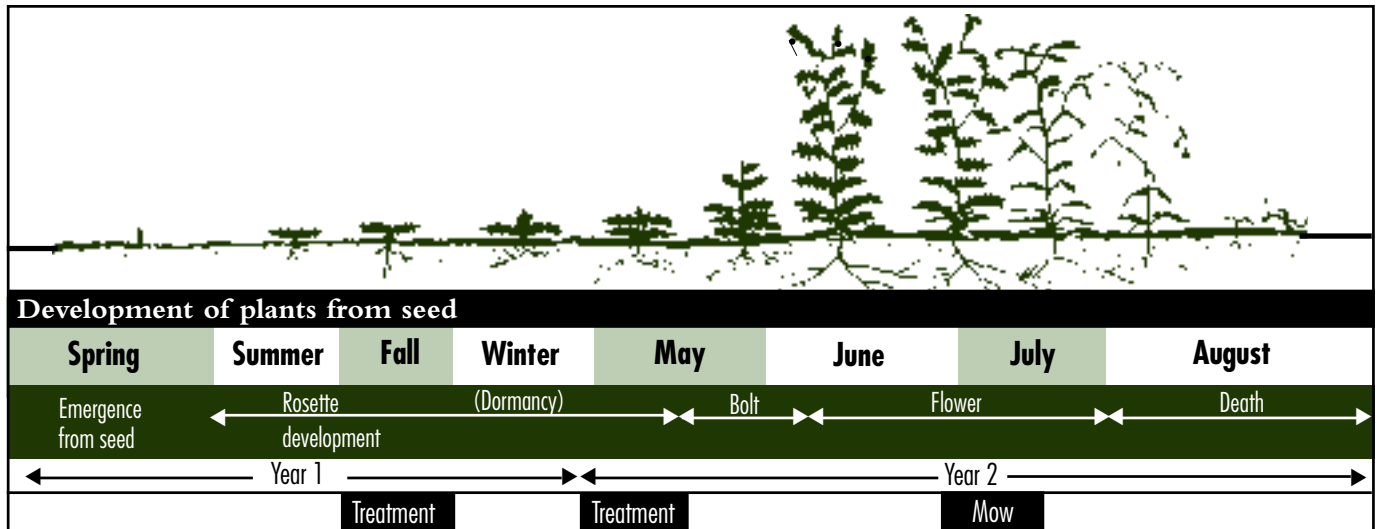


Figure 12b. Life cycle of the musk thistle weevil.

**Figure 13. Biennial life cycle of musk thistle in Nebraska.**



reduced seed production. Eggs are laid in rosettes in late fall to early spring, larvae feed for six to eight weeks, pupate in the soil, and emerge as adults in June. Weevils overwinter as adults with one generation per year.

The musk thistle tortoise beetle (*Cassida rubiginosa*) is a leaf feeder that will skeletonize the leaves. Eggs are laid on the leaf surface and both the larvae and adults skeletonize large areas of the plant. It overwinters as an adult with one generation per year.

The rust fungus (*Puccinia carduorum*)

becomes active about the time musk thistle begins to bolt. About a week after inoculation white blister-like flecks appear. In two to three days these develop into brown pustules (up to 1/8 inch in diameter), and within two weeks produce spores. Infected leaves turn yellow and die.

Musk thistle biological control agents suppress growth, especially if several agents are present on the plants, but do not kill the host plant. Manage these agents by allowing some plants to produce flowers and to serve as hosts for

increasing the bioagent populations. These host plants should be well within the borders of the land. Only a small patch will be needed initially. The area can be expanded over time but good judgement needs to be exercised. One cannot abandon other control practices completely or immediately.

Biological control has the potential to become a very important tool for musk thistle control. Noxious weed regulations currently state that biological control methods must be as effective as herbicides and need to be approved by the local control authority. A landowner interested in using biological methods for musk thistle control should contact the county Noxious Weed Control Authority to work out an agreeable control strategy. Biological control has worked fairly well in some locations if the landowner is willing to learn how to develop high populations of the biological control agents and keep them working over the years.

### Chemical

Several herbicide treatments are effective for musk thistle control (Table I). Fall herbicide applications are preferred because they will be less harmful to biological control insects and, when combined with the effects of winter, will kill a high percentage of musk thistle plants. If herbicide application is delayed until the plant flowers, the plant probably will produce viable seed. Research at the University of Nebraska has shown that a late September or October treatment of

**Table I.**  
**Musk and Plumeless Thistle<sup>1</sup>**

Herbicide	Rate/acre	Time of Treatment <sup>2</sup>	Notes
Ally	0.2-0.3 oz	Late fall or spring before bolting	Use in pastures, grasses for seed, fallow and CRP. Curtail may be used in wheat.
Curtail	2 pt		
Escort	1 oz	Bolted plants in spring prior to flowering	Use in noncropland and roadsides. Add surfactant at 1 pint/100 gal.
2,4-D ester (4L)	1.5-2 qt	Late fall treatment of rosettes or in spring before flowering stalks lengthen.	Annual treatments necessary for control of new seedlings. Fall applications after trees drop leaves and before leafing out in the spring reduces damage. Do not apply after "soil freeze-up" in the fall. For use on ranges and permanent pastures only.
2,4-D ester (4L) + Banvel/Clarity/Sterling	1 qt + 0.5 pt		
Tordon 22K	8-12 oz		
Grazon P+D Transline Redeem R&P	2-4 pt 0.33-1 pt 1.5-2.0 pt	Rosette to early bolt growth stage	

<sup>1</sup>These recommendations were current as of Jan. 1, 2003. See "Guide for Weed Management in Nebraska" EC-130, for current information. It's available in print at local Cooperative Extension offices or on the Web at <http://www.ianr.unl.edu/pubs/fieldcrops/ec130.htm>.

<sup>2</sup>Best control will be obtained if treatments are made when plants are actively growing. Treatment in following years may be required. Dust on leaves may interfere with herbicides.

2,4-D at one pound per acre, Tordon 22K at 6 to 8 ounces per acre, or one quart of 2,4-D (4 lb/gal) plus 0.5 pint of Banvel per acre will provide good musk thistle control. In the spring, Tordon 22 at 6 to 8 ounces per acre or one quart 2,4-D plus 0.5 pint Banvel applied in the late rosette stage (late April) has shown good control and was more consistent than 2,4-D applied alone. If treatment is delayed until early flowering, some viable seed will be produced. Ally at 0.3 ounce per acre is one of the better choices at this late stage. After this growth stage broadcast application of herbicides is not very effective.

For more information on herbicide application rates and timing, see *Table I*, contact your local Cooperative Extension educator, or check the latest issue of the NU Cooperative Extension publication, "Guide for Weed Management in Nebraska," EC130.

When Ally, 2,4-D, Banvel + 2,4-D, and Tordon were applied to musk thistle in the rosette or bolting growth stage, plants were suppressed and seed production was dramatically reduced. When these same herbicides were applied to musk thistle in the bud to early bloom growth stage, plant suppression was

reduced and plants produced significant quantities of viable seed (*Figures 10 and 11*). Also, later in the year after trees and shrubs in the treatment area have leafed out, much of the herbicide from an aerial application will be intercepted and not reach the musk thistle.

Backpack- or vehicle-mounted sprayers work well when hand spraying individual plants or patches of musk thistle missed by a broadcast application. Applying a mixture of one part 2,4-D amine and 19 parts water to just wet the plant is suggested. This method can be much cheaper than a broadcast treatment and can effectively limit seed production. Treating the last few plants is important because they would be the seed source for the next few years. Another important benefit of this method is that damage to legumes and other sensitive crops is minimized with spot treatment.

Musk thistle is one of the earliest flowering thistles. The first flowers begin appearing about June 1 in southern Nebraska to June 15 in western Nebraska. Flower stalk lengthening (bolting) begins about one month before bloom. Along the Kansas-Nebraska border, treat before May 1. As you move further north or west, spray before May 10. Regardless of

location, make sure spring treatments are applied before stems lengthen and rapid plant growth begins.

Herbicide application can be made later into the fall as long as the leaves have not been frosted and the daytime high temperatures are expected to be in the 50s for the next three days. Applications can be resumed in the spring when plants are actively growing and the daytime high temperatures are expected to be in the 50s for the next three days. To protect desired trees and shrubs, aerial application should be made after tree leaf drop in the fall and before bud break in the spring. Ground applications should be directed away from green leaves and green bark.

Do not graze lactating dairy cows on pastures treated with 2,4-D or Banvel for one week after treatment to prevent traces of chemical being found in milk. Observe all precautions and instructions on the pesticide label.

---

**Note:** Reference to commercial products or trade names is made with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by NU Cooperative Extension is implied.

## A Message From the Nebraska Department of Agriculture

The State of Nebraska has had a noxious weed law for many years. Over the years, the Nebraska Legislature has revised this law.

The term "noxious" means to be harmful or destructive. In its current usage "noxious" is a legal term used to denote a destructive or harmful pest for purposes of regulation. When a specific pest (in this case, a weed) is determined to pose a serious threat to the economic, social, or aesthetic well-being of the residents of the state, it may be declared noxious.

Noxious weeds compete with crops, rangeland, and pastures, reducing yields substantially. Some noxious weeds are directly poisonous or injurious to man, livestock, and wildlife. The losses from noxious weed infestations can be staggering, costing residents millions of dollars due to lost production. This not only directly affects the landowner, but erodes the tax base for all residents of the state. The control of noxious weeds is everyone's concern and their control is to everyone's benefit. The support of all individuals within the state is needed and vital for the control of noxious weeds within Nebraska.

It is the duty of each person who owns or controls land in Nebraska to effectively control noxious weeds on their land. County boards or control authorities are responsible for administration of noxious weed control laws at the county level. This system provides the citizens of Nebraska with "local con-

trol". Each county is required to implement a coordinated noxious weed program. When landowners fail to control noxious weeds on their property, the county can serve them with a notice to comply. This notice gives specific instructions and methods on when and how certain noxious weeds are to be controlled.

The Director of Agriculture determines which plants are to be deemed as "noxious" and the control measures to be used in preventing their spread. In Nebraska, the following weeds have been designated as noxious:

Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense* (L.) Scop.)  
Leafy spurge (*Euphorbia esula* L.)  
Musk thistle (*Carduus nutans* L.)  
Plumeless thistle (*Carduus acanthoides* L.)  
Purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria* L. and *L. virgatum* - including any cultivars and hybrids)  
Knapweed (spotted and diffuse) (*Centaurea maculosa* Lam. and *C. diffusa* Lam.)

Whether farmer or rancher, landowner or landscaper, it's everyone's responsibility and everyone's benefit to aid in controlling these noxious weeds. If you have questions or concerns regarding noxious weeds in Nebraska, please contact your local county noxious weed control authority or the Nebraska Department of Agriculture.



# Musk Thistle

Illustration of the Musk thistle is by Bellamy Parks Jansen; originally published in *Weeds of Nebraska and the Great Plains*. Used with permission of the publisher, the Nebraska Department of Agriculture.

Nebraska  
Lincoln

Published by University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension in cooperation with  
and with financial support from the Nebraska Department of Agriculture.



Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Elbert Dickey, Dean and Director, University of Nebraska, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln does not discriminate on the basis of gender, age, disability, race, color, religion, marital status, veteran's status, national or ethnic origin, or sexual orientation.