

COMMON BURDOCK

[*Arctium minus* (Hill) Bernh.]



COMMON BURDOCK

State Noxious Weed List: **No.**

Common burdock, also referred to as wild rhubarb, is a member of the Asteraceae or sunflower family. Common burdock is native to Europe and now is established throughout much of North America. A tea once was made from the roots to treat gout and rheumatism. The plant is able to spread to new areas by seeds that are found within burs of the plant that cling to hair, fur or clothing of passing animals or people.

Identification and growth form:

Common burdock often is found growing along roadsides and ditch banks and in pastures and waste areas. Burdock is a taprooted biennial that reproduces only by seed. In the first year of growth, the plant forms a rosette of large, heart-shaped, thickly hairy leaves similar to rhubarb. Burdock plants bolt in the second year of growth and grow 3 to 10 feet tall. Leaves of the plant are alternate and large with the broadest leaves located at the base. Leaves are dark green above and whitish green and woolly-hairy beneath with margins that are toothed or wavy. Flowers of the plant are pink, lavender, purple or white and 0.75 inch across. Numerous flower heads present are borne in leaf axils or at the end of branches. The heads are enclosed in a prickly bur that is composed of numerous smooth or woolly bracts that are tipped with hooked spines.

The head, or bur, of the flower breaks off and scatters the seeds. Achenes are gray to brown, mottled, oblong, about 0.25 inch long, flattened and slightly curved. Flowering and seed production occur from July to September. One plant is capable of producing 15,000 to 60,000 seeds.

Why is this plant a concern?

The plant is a host to powdery mildew and root rot that can spread to economically important plants. Burs of common burdock can become entangled in the wool of sheep and significantly damage the quality. Burs also can become entangled in the hair of livestock, allowing seeds to be distributed to new areas. The burs can cause eye disease, mouth sores and skin infections. In addition, milk products may become tainted if the plant is grazed in large quantities.

Common burdock has been used as a medicinal herb; however, the plant has been listed as a poisonous plant due to its diuretic effects. The bristles of the plant also may cause localized allergic reactions for some individuals.

How do I control this plant?

Chemical. Burdock is controlled easily by herbicides such as 2,4-D, dicamba (various) and Escort (metsulfuron). However, the plant usually grows in areas difficult to reach with spray equipment. Herbicides are most effective when applied in the first year during the rosette growth stage of the plant.

Cultural. Hand-pulling or digging can be an effective control method for small infestations if conducted prior to seed production. The plant will not survive in areas that are tilled. Mowing or cutting can eliminate seed production if conducted after the plant has bolted but prior to flowering.

Biological. The burdock moth *Metzneria lappella* Zeller provides some control of seed production. The larvae feed on burdock seed but damage varies greatly from year to year since the number of healthy larvae per bur ranges widely. The adults emerge in late June to early July and have pale brown wings approximately 0.5 inch across. The burdock moth is not readily available in the U.S.