BULL THISTLE

[*Cirsium vulgare* (Savi) Tenore]

BULL THISTLE

State Noxious Weed List: **No.**

Bull thistle is the least serious of the introduced thistles in North Dakota. Native Americans used bull thistle to treat hemorrhoids, which they likely learned from French fur trappers. Bull thistle often is referred to as edible. Many plant parts from the root to the flower are eaten. The flower petals are used as chewing gum.

Identification and growth form:

Bull thistle is a biennial that grows from a flat rosette of leaves the first year to a flowering stem the second year, often 5 feet or more in height. Plants are multibranched; stems have purple veins and are winged. The plant appears bushy rather than the candelabra appearance of plumeless or Canada thistle. A distinguishing characteristic of bull thistle is the leaves. Leaf margins are deeply toothed and toothed again (double dentate) with prominent stiff spines. The leaf surface has a distinct center vein with slight prickly hairs above and cottony pubescence below. The stems are very pubescent with dark purple veins. The rosettes of bull thistle are very pubescent with deeply lobed leaves and dark purple ribs.

Bull thistle flower heads usually are found singularly at the end of each stem branch. The flowers are gumdrop shaped, large (2 to 3 inches tall), with long, stiff, yellow-tipped spines. Bull thistle flowers from July to September, which is somewhat later than other thistles in the region. The flowers are generally purple but rarely a white form is observed. Achenes are 0.1 to 0.15 inch long, glossy light brown to pale yellow or white with narrow dark brown stripes and favored by birds.

Why is this plant a concern?

Bull thistle occurs in all 48 contiguous states and most of Canada, but is designated noxious in only a few states. Bull thistle generally is found growing singularly or in small patches in the northern and eastern counties of the state. The large size and showy flowers of the plant makes it quite noticeable in pasture and rangeland, but it has little economic or ecological consequence.

How do I control this plant?

Bull thistle seldom reaches high enough densities to warrant treatment.

Chemical. Fall is the preferred time for applying herbicides for bull thistle control. Fall treatment allows more time for herbicide application than in the spring and thistle control is generally best with fall treatments. Seedlings that emerge in summer after tillage or previous herbicide applications will not bolt but remain in the rosette stage. Bull thistles are most susceptible to herbicides in the rosette form.

Bull thistles can be controlled effectively with Milestone (aminopyralid), clopyralid (Stinger, Transline or Curtai), Tordon (picloram), or dicamba (various) or dicamba plus diflufenzopyr (Overdrive). Products that contain metsulfuron (Escort, Cimarron Max, others) will control bull thistles in the spring and will eliminate seed production when applied in the bolting to bud growth stages.

Cultural. Cultivation or hand-digging the rosette prior to bolting will kill the plant and prevent seed-set.

Biological. Biological control of biennial thistles is in the research/implementation stage. The seed head gall fly *Urophora stylata* has been released but is marginally successful and only on thistles stressed by other factors. This insect is not appropriate for small infestations, heavily grazed areas, or areas that flood.