

Lancaster County Weed Control – City of Lincoln Weed Abatement

There's a difference between a good thistle and a bad one

INSIDE THIS REPORT:

Tall thistle 1

Nebraska's Noxious Weeds 2



Above: Tall thistle, Native to Nebraska. Considered a wild flower, very beneficial plant to insects and birds.

Below: Musk thistle, Non-native to Nebraska. Designated a noxious and required to be controlled.



Click here for more information on all the [Thistles of Nebraska](#)

*Written by Nancy Hicks
Lincoln JournalStar*

One morning this month the county's weed superintendent got a call from a golfer who said he'd spotted musk thistle, the noxious weed with the pinkish purple flower, near the sixth fairway at HiMark Golf Course.

But it wasn't musk thistle growing near the creek. It was a look-alike relative -- the innocuous tall thistle -- which is a friend to bumblebees and long-horned bees and butterflies, said Superintendent Brent Meyer.

About half the calls to Meyer's office this month are from people reporting stands of musk thistle, a noxious weed.

Only they're not musk thistle.

This time of the year the blooming plant is likely tall thistle, a good thistle, a native thistle. Where you find tall thistle you usually find bees and butterflies and birds, Meyer said.

Some callers are insistent that this is musk thistle, the evil plant that chokes out all other plants, covers pastures and range land with inedible spiny plants.

So Meyer is hoping a little

education will help people distinguish between good and bad thistles with pinkish-purple flowers.

Tall thistle has silver color on the underside of its leaves. Most native thistles are either silver or light greenish-gray in color, or have some silver on parts of the plant, he says.

Musk thistle has no silver.

Tall thistle flowers in August and September in eastern Nebraska. So that's the plant most people are seeing now.

Musk thistle flowers in May and June in the eastern part of the state. This time of year musk thistle is usually dried up and has fallen over, Meyer said.

Tall thistle is generally no taller than musk thistle -- 5 to 7 feet tall. But it is more of a bushy plant.

Tall thistle is often found in drainage ditches and wetland areas and not in pastures.

So, not all thistles are created equal.

And the difference can be confusing, particularly when they look so much alike.

There are the bad thistles - the [musk thistle](#), the [plumeless thistle](#) and the [Canada thistle](#), all with

purplish flowers -- which came from other countries without their natural predators to keep them in check. These have been designated as noxious weeds, which landowners are required to control.

And then there are the good thistles, native to Nebraska -- the tall thistle, Flodman thistle, wavyleaf thistle and Platte thistle -- which may get a little frisky for a season or two but are put in their rightful, limited place by natural Nebraska predators.

Generally these good thistles attract butterflies, sometimes bees, and their seeds are eaten by songbirds.

This year, perhaps because of a wet fall a year ago, tall thistle is abundant, said Meyer. And that means many phone calls and people upset because they believe the county weed authority, the local natural resources district and the parks department aren't doing their job.

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Nebraska's Noxious Weeds

It is the duty of each person who owns or controls land to effectively control noxious weeds on such land.

Noxious weed is a legal term used to denote a destructive or harmful weed for the purpose of regulation.

The Director of Agriculture establishes which plants are noxious. These non-native plants compete aggressively with desirable plants and vegetation. Failure to control noxious weeds in this state is a serious problem which is detrimental to the production of crops and livestock, and to the welfare of residents of this state. Noxious weeds may also devalue land and reduce tax revenue.



<p>Musk Thistle Height 1.6–9.8 ft</p> <p>Pink to purple flowers Mature seedhead</p>	<p>Canada Thistle Height 1–3.9 ft</p> <p>Pink to purple flowers</p>	<p>Plumeless Thistle Height 1–4.9 ft</p> <p>Purple flowers</p>
<p>Phragmites Height 3.2–20 ft</p> <p>Young seedhead Mature seedhead</p>	<p>Leafy Spurge Height .3–2.6 ft</p> <p>Large yellow leaves (bracts) Stems/leaves have milky sap</p>	<p>Sericea Lespedeza Height 1.5–6.5 ft</p> <p>White or cream to yellowish white flowers</p>
<p>Japanese Knotweed Height 3–10 ft</p> <p>Creamy white to greenish white flowers</p>	<p>Giant Knotweed Height 8–13 ft</p> <p>Creamy white to greenish white flowers</p>	<p>Purple Loosestrife Height 1.3–8 ft</p> <p>Purple to magenta flowers</p>
<p>Saltcedar Height 3.3–20 ft</p> <p>Pink to white flowers</p>	<p>Spotted Knapweed Height 1–3.9 ft</p> <p>Lavender to purple flowers</p>	<p>Diffuse Knapweed Height 1–3.9 ft</p> <p>White/purplish flowers</p>
<p>Lancaster County's Noxious Weeds</p>	<p>Cutleaf Teasel Height 4–8 ft</p> <p>White flowers</p>	<p>Common Teasel Height 3–6 ft</p> <p>Lavender to white flowers</p>

Good neighbors control noxious weeds — If you have questions or concerns about noxious weeds, please contact your local county noxious weed control authority, Nebraska Weed Control Association (www.neweed.org), or Nebraska Department of Agriculture.