

CANADA THISTLE AND KNAPWEED CONTROL

My children often roll their eyes whenever I tell stories of my younger days. They claim things couldn't have been as thorny as I claim they were, but I think they feel guilty for having life so easy today.

One of my stories has to do with endless days at the end of a shovel chopping thistles. It seems we used to have a persistent population of thistles in many of our fields and my father considered mechanical means (hand hoeing) to be the best method of control. As such, my older brother and I spent many hours doing just that. We found that Bull thistle, Musk thistle or Scotch thistle could easily be chopped with one hefty swipe of the shovel. Dense patches of Canada thistles were more troublesome because of their extensive spreading roots (rhizomes). It was always discouraging to start on the Canadians, and I'm not sure our mechanical approach was the best method to use.

Canada thistle is a perennial plant with extensive spreading roots that rapidly form dense colonies. Vegetative shoots arise from adventitious buds located on the Canada thistle roots. This persistent plant also spreads by seed; each shoot can produce more than 1000 seeds. Plants grow from 1 to 4 feet tall and have spiny, lance-shaped leaves. Purple, lavender, or sometimes white flower heads appear from June to October. This noxious weed infests many habitats such as cultivated fields, roadsides, wildlands, rangelands and pastures. It is often found along waterways and stream banks, too.

Research in several western states show that fall applications of systemic herbicides is an effective way of controlling Canada thistle. Other methods do not give long-term control. In the fall, as the nights get colder, Canada thistle plants translocate sugars to the roots. As such, systemic herbicides actually kill the roots and terminate the spread of the plants. Research shows that fall applications can be made as long as there is live Canada thistle foliage showing.

Knowing there are several herbicides that help control Canada thistle, I have really been impressed with the Milestone herbicide, distributed by Dow AgroSciences. Milestone is a relatively new liquid formulation developed specifically for use on rangeland and pastures. Not only does Milestone control Canada thistle, it also does a great job on Musk, Scotch and Bull thistle, Yellow star thistle and Spotted, Diffuse and Russian knapweed.

Field trials have shown that Milestone controls near 90% of stated weeds and does so with little or no injury to desirable cool and warm season grasses. There are no grazing restrictions for any class of livestock, including lactating dairy cows, beef cattle, horses, sheep and goats. Milestone can be applied by ground or by air, mixes well with other herbicides and stays in solution. Milestone is not a federally Restricted Use Pesticide, so no license is required for purchase or application. Milestone can also be applied up to water's edge, allowing producers to target tough species in previously untreatable areas.

I walked a pasture this week that was heavily infested with Canada and Scotch thistle one year ago. The Cache County Weed Department made a single 2007 fall application of Milestone at the rate of 5 ounces per acre. Our evaluation one year after treatment is estimated at 90% control. We plan to make another application within the next week or two, at a lower rate, and expect 100% control by next year.

Many weeds respond well to a fall application of systemic herbicides. With crop harvest complete and other summer chores done, fall application timing offers significant economic benefits to landowners.