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# AFGHAN THISTLE



1. Flower 2. Rosette 3. Fruit

(continued over)

# AFGHAN THISTLE

**A**fghan thistle, also occasionally called Prickly potato-weed, belongs to the large botanical family Solonaceae. It is related to the tomato and potato. The same common name is given to two species—*Solanum hystrix* and *S. hoplopetalum* as both look very similar. Afghan thistle is a native plant in Western Australia. It is a pest plant in several wheatbelt shires.

## **Importance:**

Afghan thistle grows through summer. It does not compete with winter pasture or cereal crops. As it is prickly, sheep tend to avoid infested areas which may lead to large amounts of summer feed being wasted.

On fallows, Afghan thistle probably depletes water and nutrient reserves. Afghan thistle is probably toxic, though no cases of stock poisoning attributed to it have been reported in W.A.

## **Ecology:**

Afghan thistle is a perennial plant which survives the winter by means of dormant roots. Small segments of roots are readily spread from one part of the paddock to another by cultivating implements, to establish a new colony of plants.

It may also be spread in the droppings of animals which have eaten the ripe berries, although this may not be important as it is unpalatable to stock.

## **Occurrence:**

Afghan thistle has been recorded from most parts of the wheatbelt and Great Southern districts. It is firmly established in the eastern wheatbelt where it covers many thousands of hectares. Further west, infestations are generally smaller and the weed less aggressive, but even in such localities, farmers regard it as a nuisance. It grows vigorously in sandy soils especially on fallowed land. Infestations are commonly

found on railway reserves, town blocks and other non-cropped land.

## **Description:**

Afghan thistle grows in colonies. Plants which appear to be separate are joined together by horizontal stems below the surface. The plant rarely exceeds 15-20 cms high. It has yellowish green leaves 10-15 cms long with lobed edges. They are heavily armed with yellow spines. Flowering occurs in the spring and early summer. The flowers are blue and bell-shaped. They grow up to 2.5 cms across and have a prickly calyx at the base. As the flowers die, this calyx remains to enclose the green berry, about 1 cm in diameter, which becomes yellow when ripe.

*For advice on Afghan thistle recognition and control, contact the Agriculture Protection Board, Jarrah Road, South Perth (09) 367 0111 or any local office of the Agriculture Protection Board or Department of Agriculture.*