

Agriculture Protection Board  
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# VARIEGATED THISTLE



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1. Plant 2. Flower 3. Infestation

(continued overleaf)

# VARIEGATED THISTLE

**V**ARIEGATED thistle (*Silybum marianum*) is an important weed of the high and medium rainfall districts of the south west of Western Australia. When established it competes with more useful pasture plants for light, moisture and nutrients.

Under certain conditions, variegated thistle is poisonous. It can kill cattle and occasionally sheep, especially when hungry animals consume large quantities in the absence of alternative feed.

It becomes more palatable to stock and more toxic when it has wilted after cutting.

It has spines which may cause injury to animals, including domestic dogs. Variegated thistle is an important contaminant of wool and the plant provides excellent cover for rabbits. Variegated thistle is a native of southern Europe and the Mediterranean. It was probably introduced as a medicinal plant before its weed potential in W.A. was realised. It is a declared plant (noxious weed) throughout the State.

## **Description:**

Variegated thistle forms a broad

rosette of shiny light or dark green leaves variegated by a network of white veins. The leaves are deeply lobed with a thorn at the point of each lobe. Each plant may cover an area of over one metre in diameter. In spring a branched flowering stem, without thorns, grows up to 3m high. Flowering starts in October and continues until early summer. One large purple compound flower is produced at the end of each stem branch. Each flower is surrounded by a circle of spines up to 13cm in diameter.

## **Ecology:**

Variegated thistle is usually an annual plant but occasionally does not flower until the second year.

It reproduces only from seed.

The seeds are black or brown, about 5mm long, somewhat flattened with a smooth seed coat.

They are equipped with a parachute-like pappus of hairs about 2cm long. Seed set takes place in summer.

The seeds are too heavy to be blown far by wind in spite of the pappus, therefore most seeds fall onto the bare ground at the base of

the dead parent plant. Variegated thistle seed may remain dormant in the soil for up to nine years.

As little as 50% of the surviving seed may germinate in any one year. Seeds may also be carried by water, vehicles, machinery or stock and in hay, chaff or silage.

The worst infestations occur in years when the ground is bare in autumn as the weed seedlings face little competition. Control may be made more difficult by several germinations during the year.

Prompt action is necessary to eradicate new and isolated patches of variegated thistle and to prevent the weed becoming established in new areas.

*For information on variegated thistle recognition and control, contact the Agriculture Protection Board, Jarrah Road, South Perth, 6151. Telephone (09) 367 0111 or any country office of the Agriculture Protection Board or the Department of Agriculture.*