



APB INFONOTE

ARTICHOKE THISTLE



1. Infestation 2. Mature plant 3. Flower

ARTICHOKE THISTLE

Artichoke thistle (*Cynara cardunculus*) is a potentially dangerous weed of pasture in higher rainfall areas of south-western Western Australia. When established, it dominates other plants by shading and by competing for moisture and nutrients. Sometimes it also competes with crops and impedes harvesting.

Artichoke thistle is not poisonous but the prickly nature of the plant deters sheep and cattle from grazing a heavy infestation. However, when hungry, they will eat Artichoke thistle foliage and survive on it, but it has a low nutritive value and may cause stomach impaction and mechanical injuries.

Artichoke thistle is a declared plant (noxious weed) in Western Australia.

It is found mainly on medium to heavy soils and generally in the less cultivated areas such as roadsides, permanent pastures and waste land.

A closely related species, globe artichoke (*C. scolymus*), is grown commercially as a vegetable, but has shown no indication of spreading and becoming established as a weed. It

differs from artichoke thistle in having more fleshy flower heads with few or no spines on the inner flower bracts or leaf lobes. Hybrids between artichoke thistle and globe artichoke are known from Victoria.

Artichoke thistle is a native of the Mediterranean regions. It has since become an important weed in California and the pampas of Argentina, following its introduction by southern European immigrants who used it as a vegetable. It was introduced to Australia late last century, either by accident with fodder or grain, or as an ornamental. It is common in Victoria and South Australia and has occasionally been found in Western Australia.

It is sometimes cultivated for its attractive flowers. These are called Cardoons, and are prized by florists for dry flower arrangements. They were once in demand by Scottish immigrants at Hogmanay.

DESCRIPTION

Artichoke thistle forms a rosette of very large leaves up to one metre or more in diameter. The leaves are silky greyish-green on the

upper surface while the under surface appears almost white because of the dense mat of white hairs. They are deeply divided, each lobe ending in a strong yellow spine.

In spring a tall, branched flowering stem up to two metres high is produced. One large blue or purple flower forms at the end of each branch. The flower heads consist of tubular florets. They are surrounded by a series of rigid spines. Each plant may produce up to 50 heads.

The seeds are brown to black, about 5 mm long with a smooth covering. They are equipped with a "parachute" of feathery bristles about 4 cm long.

LIFE CYCLE

Seeds germinate in autumn and rapidly form a large flat rosette of leaves and a deep tap root. The plant occasionally flowers in the first year, but usually not until the second summer. The first set of rosette leaves normally dies off over the summer and new leaves are formed in the second autumn. Flowering stems emerge in the spring. Flowering commences in early December and

continues into February. After this the above ground parts of the plant die off. New rosette leaves are produced from the crown after autumn rains and the cycle recommences.

ECOLOGY

Artichoke thistle is a perennial plant which reproduces mainly by seed. New plants sometimes form from root fragments after cultivation.

Seeds are set in summer. The seeds are too big for effective wind dispersal, most falling within 20 metres of the flowering plant and the majority within a metre. Seed may also be spread by flooding, sheep, cattle, birds and mice.

Prompt action is essential to eradicate isolated patches of artichoke thistle to prevent the weed getting established in Western Australia.

Suspect plants should be reported to the Agriculture Protection Board, telephone (09) 368 3333 or any country office of the Agriculture Protection Board or Department of Agriculture.