

Russian Thistle

Salsola kali



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OTHER COMMON NAMES: prickly Russian thistle, saltwort, tumbleweed, windwitch, prickly glasswort

DESCRIPTION

Russian thistle is an annual tap-rooted forb that grows one to three-feet tall. Seedlings look very similar to pine tree seedlings. The plant stands erect and is spiny and profusely branched. The stems of young plants have red or purple stripes. The green leaves are alternate, thread-like, stalkless, cylindrical or awl-shaped with pointed tips. Flowers are small and greenish, and lack petals. Papery, spine-tipped bracts are at the base of each flower. It typically blooms from July through October.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Many-branched spiny shrubs that look like a "tumbleweed"
- Stems with red stripes
- Plants bristly (from spiny bracts) at maturity
- Leaves spine-tipped

WHEN TO FIND RUSSIAN THISTLE

Russian thistle germinates in spring (March - April), blooms from July through October, and breaks off to form "tumbleweeds" at maturity. It can flower and produce seed until the temperature drops below -3.9°C (25°F).

WHERE TO FIND RUSSIAN THISTLE

It commonly grows in cultivated fields, pastures, waste areas, irrigated areas, river bottoms, rangeland, disturbed areas, forest edges, and along roadsides, trails, streams and lakes. It also favors inland and coastal dunes and sandy beaches.

WHAT TO DO

Russian thistle can be hand pulled so long as you are sure of its identification. Take care not to spread seeds.

Native to Russia, Russian thistle was brought to the United States in 1873 in contaminated flax seed. It is prevalent in the semi-arid range of the western states due to its tolerance of drought and long-distance method of dispersal. In Oregon, it is found throughout the eastern half of the state.

Russian thistle reproduces by seed, which are widely dispersed by the "tumbleweeds" that form when plants mature and break off at ground level. As a result, "trails" of seedlings are often produced across fields.

Considered very invasive, Russian thistle can dominate areas that experience drought conditions or have been cleared of competing vegetation. It competes with native species, blocks stream channels and roadways, and can become a fire hazard.

The establishment of Russian thistle can be prevented by planting desirable competing plants in open fields or disturbed areas. Effective control methods include cutting, mowing or tilling, certain herbicides, and two approved biocontrol agents.

REFERENCES

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Flower. USDA APHIS PPQ Archives,
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