

# Invasive Plants in Pennsylvania

## Bull thistle

**PA Noxious Weed**

*Cirsium vulgare* (Savi) Ten.



Deric Case, DCNR-BOF

### Background:

Thought to have been introduced to eastern North America during colonial times and western North America during late 1800s.

### Range:

This plant is native to Europe, western Asia and northern Africa. It can now be found on every continent except Antarctica, and it is present in all 50 states in the U.S., although it is not as common in the southern states as it is in the north.

### Habitat:

This plant has the ability to become established in a wide variety of areas, especially ones that have been disturbed, like clearcuts, riparian areas and pastures.

### Description:

Stems grow up to seven feet tall and have lance shaped, hairy leaves that are three to 12 inches long. There are lobes on each leaf, and they are tipped with stout spines. Flower heads are purple and one to two inches across. They appear from June to September.

### Biology and Spread:

Bull thistle reproduces and spreads exclusively by seed. Plants produce 100 to 300 seeds per flower head, with up to 400 flower heads per plant. Seeds exhibit features that are suited for wind dispersal. Roughly 90 percent of seeds land within a distance of 1.5 times the height of the parent plant, however up to 10 percent of seeds produced do travel over 80 feet.



Steve Dewey, Utah State Univ.

### Ecological Threat

Bull thistle has the potential to form dense thickets that displace and prevent native vegetation from establishing. The spiny features of the plant also make it unpalatable to wildlife and livestock, reducing forage land available.

### How to Control this Species:

Prevention should be the first goal in any control efforts for this plant. Equipment and gear need to be extensively cleaned after use in an infested area, to prevent seed transport. Use of weed-free seed should also be conducted.

Manual removal of plants via hand pulling, tilling and hoeing can be effective, but care should be taken to conduct these measures before flowering, in order to prevent seed production and spread. Slicing off the root crown has proven to be very effective at controlling this plant.

Herbicides are most effective at controlling infestations when incorporated as part of a long-term, multifaceted control effort.



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### If You Find This Plant

Bull thistle is on the **Pennsylvania Noxious Weed Control List**. It is illegal to sell, transport, plant or otherwise propagate this species. If you believe that you have found a new population of this plant, please contact:

**Botany/Weed Specialist**  
**Pennsylvania Dept of Agriculture**  
**Phone 717-787-7204**