



Photo:  
Jonn Leffmann,  
Wikimedia



# Scotch Thistle



Scotch thistle leaves have spiny leaf edges.  
Photo: Fabrice Rubio.

## What Is It?

Scotch thistle (*Onopordum acanthium*) was introduced to the United States as an ornamental in the 1800s. It can grow up to eight feet tall and six feet wide and is native to Europe and Asia.

## Is It Here Yet?

Yes. Scotch thistle has been documented in many parts of Washington, particularly eastern Washington.

## Why Should I Care?

Scotch thistle invades disturbed areas, such as roadsides, ditches, pastures (especially when overgrazed), campgrounds, and burned areas. Its dense stands compete with native plants for resources and physically can prevent animals from reaching water and food.

## What Are Its Characteristics?

- Gray-green, highly branched stems are coarse with many spines.
- Leaves are oblong and prickly with toothed edges.
- The plant forms dark pink to purple, globe-shaped flowerheads, 1-3 inches wide. Flowers bloom on branch tips from July-October.
- A whorl of leaf-like structures beneath the flower has flat, pale, orange to green spines.
- Seeds are less than 1/4 inch long, slender, smooth, and plumed.



Scotch thistle flower.  
Photo: Jonn Leffmann,  
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## How Do I Distinguish It From Native Species?

Scotch thistle may be distinguished from all other thistles by the dense, white, woolly covering on stems and leaves.

## How Can We Stop It?

Do not purchase, plant, trade, sell, or release this species. Scotch thistle is on Washington's Terrestrial Noxious Weed Seed and Plant Quarantine list, meaning it is prohibited to transport, buy, sell, offer for sale, or distribute Scotch thistle plants, plant parts, or seeds. Scotch thistle also is listed as a Class B noxious weed in Washington, meaning it is designated for control in certain state regions. Promoting native and desired species also should help slow the spread of Scotch thistle.

## What Should I Do If I Find It?

Report immediately via the WA Invasives mobile app or reporting web form at <https://invasivespecies.wa.gov/report-a-sighting/>.



Photo: Eric Coombs, Oregon  
Department of Agriculture,  
Bugwood.org