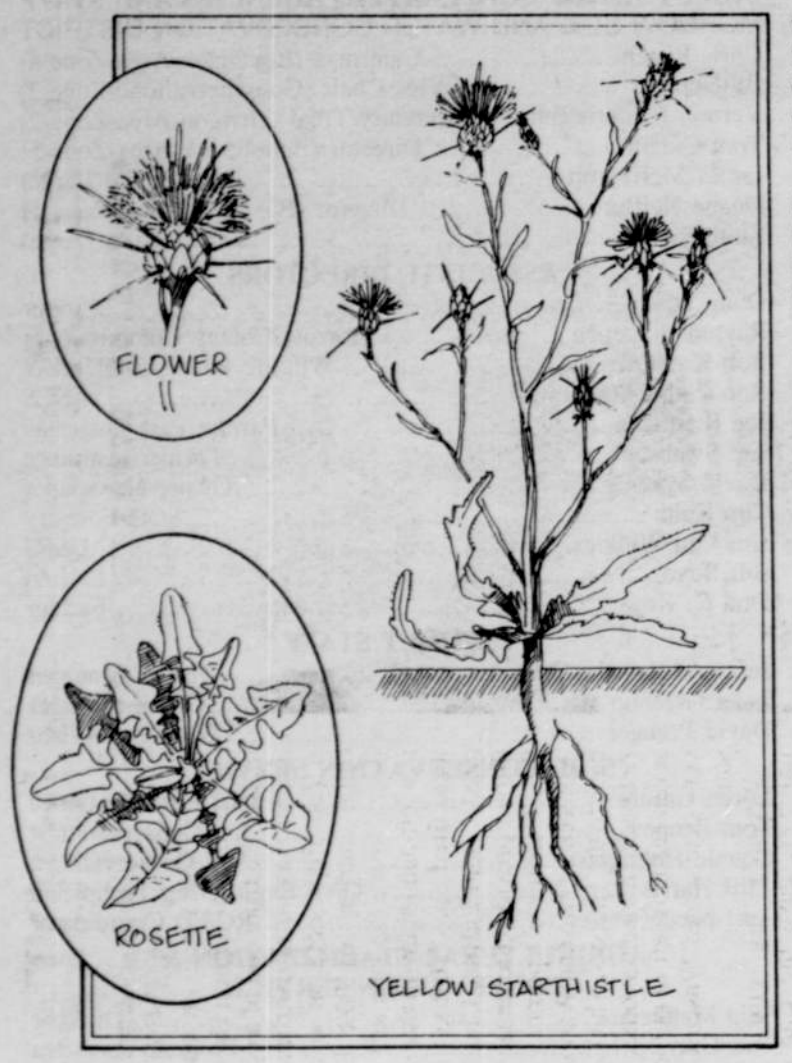
Recognize Yellow Starthistle



From a distance, it's a pretty yellow flower. Up close, it's a spiny weed and very damaging for landowners. Yellow starthistle infests hundreds of thousands of acres in the Northwest and Montana and is spreading rapidly.

This weed is easily recognized by its bright yellow flowers and long sharp spines below each flower. The mature plant is grey-green in color and may reach a height of one to three feet. Skeletons of last year's plants are also easily identified by the white, cottony remnants of flower heads.

A native of the Mediterranean region and member of the knapweed group, yellow starthistle is commonly classed as a winter annual. It germinates with fall or spring moisture and is capable of germinating and producing seed during one growing season.

Because the plant is most easily controlled during the seedling to rosette stage of growth, spring is a good time to identify infestations and apply control programs.

Yellow starthistle is an invasive competitor with desirable plants in range and pasture. It can crowd out grasses where soil moisture is limited or plants have been weakened by grazing. Where this weed is well established its sharp spines may exclude livestock from grazing any grasses growing beneath the starthistle plants.

This weed produces a toxin that causes death in horses through an illness called "chewing disease". Horses consuming the plant may develop the disease, which makes it impossible for the animal to swallow. The sharp spines may also damage the eyes of cattle or other livestock attempting to graze around the plants.

Starthistle is widespread in many areas of Idaho, Washington and Oregon. There are major infestations in the Clearwater and Salmon River drainages as well as the lower Snake River breaks in Idaho. Washington is estimated to have 133,000 acres infested with this weed. Oregon has major infestations in the foothills of the Blue Mountains and counties bordering the Columbia River. Many other areas contain smaller infestations.

Effective control of yellow starthistle is best achieved by eradication of newly identified infestations and treatment of larger infestations for containment of the weed. Well coordinated and longterm control programs are often needed for control of larger infestations.

Combinations of chemical and cultural controls generally offer the best prospects for control of existing infestations. In future years biological controls may become important for reducing plant vigor and slowing spread of the weed.

Yellow starthistle plants are easily killed by herbicide application. Long-term control, however, depends upon the amount of weed seed in the soil, effective length of the herbicide residual in the soil, and the productive potential of the site. Smaller infestations can be eradicated by repeat applications of a soil residual herbicide, such as TORDON* 22K.

The best time for herbicide applications is during the seedling or rosette stages of growth, when soil moisture is present and the plants are actively growing. Spring and early summer are generally the recommended seasons for these applications.

Changes in grazing management or other cultural practices should be applied in conjunction with herbicide use for long-term control in large areas of infestation. Increases in vigor and competition from desirable species can help reduce the growth and spread of yellow starthistle.

Landowners interested in identification or control programs for yellow starthistle are encouraged to contact county weed control personnel or the county agricultural extension agent for specific recommendations.

Weed vs. bugs - who will win?

With pesticides coming under greater scrutiny and regulation, the Morrow County Weed Control District has become more involved with biological controls for noxious weeds. Since 1991 the weed district has made 37 releases of 16 different insects for eight different noxious weeds. Some of these insects have come from as far away as Greece, Turkey and Hungary.

Before these insects are approved for release though, the US Department of Agriculture has to make sure these insects will not affect native vegetation or agricultural crops. For some insects, research and testing may run about $500,000.00 before the insects are approved for transport and release within the United States. While these insects usually do not totally control the weeds, they can help slow down their spread so that the weeds can be maintained below an economic threshold level.

One of the big success stories in Oregon was the impact that the cinnabar moth and flea bettle had on tansy ragwort. Before these insects were introduced, the number of cattle deaths attributed to tansy ragwort poisoning was costing the industry millions of dollars each year. However, a recent economic study done by an Oregon State University economist has shown that since these two insects were introduced there has been a 15 to one return to the cattle industry because of the reduction of tansy ragwort poisonings.

Closer to home, some of the insects working on diffuse and spotted knapweed in Morrow County are reducing seed production 50 to 90% in some spots. As to who will win the battle though, only time will tell.