

Wednesday  
August 13<sup>th</sup>,  
2025

# Weed Wednesday

Foothills County

Issue #5



## **Nodding Thistle – *Carduus nutans***

Designation- Prohibited Noxious

Introduced from Europe, nodding thistle causes serious pasture problems with its aggressive growth and rapid spread. It is a biennial or winter annual that has the potential to degrade native grasslands and meadows. It prefers disturbed areas but will still invade healthy plant communities. It does not tolerate excessively wet, dry or shady conditions.

In its first year of growth, nodding thistle forms a large rosette. In its second year, it will grow between 20cm to 2.5m tall and flower. The leaves are deeply lobed and arranged alternate. Additionally, they can have a waxy surface or sometimes long hairs. Often the margins of the leaves are white.



Nodding thistle forms a rosette that does not bloom in its first year of growth.



When mature flower heads will often droop. A single flower may produce 1,100 seeds.

The solitary flower heads at the end of stems are 3-5cm in diameter and contain hundreds of tiny reddish-purple flowers. At the base of each head there are spiny brackets in several rows. Nodding thistle only reproduces by seeds that are highly mobile due to the pappus bristle attached allowing the wind to carry it. It forms a long taproot that is corky and hollow near the crown.

A key factor in controlling nodding thistle is preventing seed production. Frequent cultivation can be an effective control method as it is a biennial and only reproduces by seed. Hand digging and severing the taproot below the ground will kill the plant. Mowing before it sets seed is effective over multiple years and the debris should be collected and burned.

Aminopyralid by itself or in tank mix with either Metsulfuron-methyl or 2,4-D are registered for use on nodding thistle. Always check product labels to ensure the herbicide is registered for use on the target plant and don't hesitate to reach out to agricultural services for more information.

Nodding thistle is also known as musk thistle. This weed is classified as prohibited noxious weed under the Weed Control Act, meaning that it must be destroyed. Prohibited noxious weeds spread rapidly and are highly competitive, posing serious threats to native ecosystems, land value and agriculture.

If you would like more information, please contact Kathleen at [Kathleen.mchugh@foothillscountyab.ca](mailto:Kathleen.mchugh@foothillscountyab.ca) or at 403-603-5409.

References- [PN\\_FS-NoddingThistle.pdf](#)

[Carduus nutans \(nodding thistle\)](#) | [CABI Compendium](#)