

Weeds in the News 2012 Yellow Starthistle

By Robin Kusske

Yellow starthistle (*Centaurea solstitialis* L.)



Image courtesy of the Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board

A Class B Noxious Weed, Yellow starthistle is a member of the Asteraceae family. Yellow starthistle is a winter annual that will germinate in the fall or spring, dependent on soil temperature. Listed as a Class B weed on the Washington State Noxious Weed List, this invasive competitor can crowd out desirable broadleaves and grasses wherever soil moisture is limited, where forage is overgrazed or soil disturbance has occurred. It particularly likes steep canyons and hillsides, making control difficult.

First discovered in California sometime after 1849, Yellow starthistle was introduced in contaminated alfalfa from Chile. Today, it now infests over 14 million acres in California, and extending as far east as New York (Maddox et al. 1985). It has also spread just as far into Canada from British Columbia to Ontario.

Flowering in June through October, Yellow Starthistle will grow wherever downy brome (cheatgrass) grows. Where this weed is well established, its sharp spines may exclude livestock from grazing any grasses growing beneath the starthistle plants. The sharp spines may also damage the eyes of cattle or other livestock and animals such as deer and elk attempting to graze around the plants. In particular, Yellow starthistle produces a toxin that can cause death in horses through an illness called "Chewing Disease," which makes it impossible for the animal to swallow. There is no known cure and is fatal. However, sheep, goats, and cattle can graze on yellow starthistle in early spring, before the flower's spines develop. Goats will also graze plants in the spiny or flowering stages.

In early fall, adult yellow starthistle plants lose their leaves and dry to a silvery-gray skeleton, with cottony white terminal seed heads making next year's early spring identification easy. There are two types of seeds, outer seeds without bristles (pappus) that fall at the base of the plant, and inner seeds with pappus that catch in fur and clothing and travel in the wind, creating new infestations.

The best control for Yellow starthistle is prevention. Hand pulling small patches, using pre-emergent or residual herbicides early in the season, and establishing and promoting dense, competitive vegetative stands is the best defense against this spiny invader.

For more information on Yellow starthistle contact the Franklin County Noxious Weed Control Board or visit the Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board website at <http://www.nwcb.wa.gov/default.asp>.