

Controlling Exotic Weeds in Timber Lakes Estates

The Problem

The State of Utah has listed 27 plants on a [noxious weed list](#). Noxious weeds are those that are non-native, fast spreading, have no natural enemies and have the potential to cause environmental and/or economic damage. Two of these listed weeds, musk thistle and houndstongue, have reached critical levels in the Timber Lakes neighborhood. Some properties have become completely overrun with them. This not only displaces native wildlife and lowers property values; it can make for less than friendly neighbor relations. In order to try to bring these weeds under control, a 2-year program of community education and outreach will begin in the summer of 2011. At the end of this time, the weed situation will be reassessed and a future course of action decided at that time.



A Timber Lakes residence overrun with musk thistle.

The Law

All property owners should be aware that there are laws regarding the control of noxious weeds on their property. Wasatch County has a [noxious weed control plan](#). The [Wasatch County Weed Management Plan](#), in accordance with the [Utah Noxious Weed Act](#) states in part:

"Notice is hereby given . . . to every person who owns or controls land in Wasatch County, Utah, that noxious weeds standing, being, or growing on such land shall be controlled and the spread of same prevented by effective [means], as often as may be required to prevent the weed from blooming and maturing seeds, or spreading . . . Upon failure to comply with this notice, the owner or person in possession of property which noxious weeds are present shall be deemed negligent and enforced control measures may be imposed at the discretion of County authorities. Expenses of control measures employed by the county shall be paid directly by the owner . . . or shall constitute a lien on the property and become collectible by taxes."

Musk Thistle *Carduus nutans*

Musk thistle is a highly aggressive weed that favors areas of full sun especially in disturbed soils such as roadsides and around new construction. Most thistles are biennials, meaning they only live 2 years. The weeds germinate from seed and spend their first year growing in a rosette form, which can survive even a long, cold winter. The following year, the musk thistle resumes growth and will begin bolting (sending up shoots) in late spring. Forty-five to 55 days later a flower forms and will continue to bloom for 7-9 weeks. It only takes about 2 weeks of blooming though for the flower to begin disseminating seeds. Each plant can produce up to 20,000 seeds; a third of these seeds can remain viable for many years.



Musk thistle rosette in disturbed soil.

Because musk thistle is such a prolific reproducer, controlling seed production is the best way to combat this species. One of the most effective ways to control this noxious weed is by applying an herbicide such as Tordon to the plant before it reaches a flowering stage. Wasatch County offers free herbicides available through the county office in Heber City.

Various sources offer mixed reviews regarding hand pulling or digging up of musk thistle. Generally, the weed you are dealing with is only one that has sprouted from a seed bank. Therefore, disturbing the soil by hand pulling or digging only gives the remaining seeds a preferred environment in which to grow. If you do choose to pull or dig a thistle, do so gently and tamp down the soil afterwards to minimize the disturbance.

Mowing may also be effective but only if done during the late flowering stage. Mowing the flowers too early will only encourage the weed to produce more flowers closer to the base where mowing may then be ineffective. Mowing too late will risk scattering seeds.

For property owners wishing a more eco-friendly form of control, plant shading may be effective for very small infestations. To use this method, collect a large number of rocks of various sizes. When a thistle rosette is discovered, place a rock over it that is large enough to completely cover it. After about a week, the thistle should be dead. Move the rock to the next discovered thistle. In addition, planting fast growing grasses will help crowd out thistles.

Houndstongue *Cynoglossum officinale*

This pretty Eurasian weed is another noxious weed that is toxic to livestock and can cause dermatitis in humans. Like thistle, it is a prolific seed producer. The seeds are often referred to as “stick-tights” since the little burrs readily cling to animal fur and human clothing. This biennial plant blooms early in its second year and produces little red to burgundy flowers. Unlike thistle, it grows equally well in shade or sun.

Control methods for houndstongue are the same as musk thistle described above. When using an herbicide, however, cutting the leaves off close to the base, then applying an herbicide to the stalk will be a quicker and more effective way of killing this nuisance weed.



Houndstongue rosette.



Houndstongue flowers.

What to do if you have weeds

If you find musk thistle or houndstongue on your property, you are already on course for a serious problem unless you act now. Recognizing and controlling weeds early will have favorable results. If your weed problem is already severe, do not despair! Regular maintenance and control will get them in check and the problem will noticeably improve year after year. Wasatch County assists property owners with free herbicides and even applications to heavy infestations. Their telephone number is (435) 654-1661. If you are concerned about your neighbor's property, please talk to them first. They may not be aware of the problem and will be appreciative of the information you can supply them. If you do not know them, you can contact the phone number above for assistance.

With a little diligence on everyone's part, we can all live in a beautiful, natural, weed-free community.