



INVASIVE ALIEN ALERT

Milk Thistle, *Silybum marianum*

Milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*) is an invasive plant from Europe that flowers from April to October. This noxious invader chokes out native species, depriving them of light and room to grow. Its large, woody thorns can pierce shoes and can be toxic to animals that eat its leaves.

A single Milk thistle blossom can produce thousands of seeds from May to July, so a single seed can start a new invasion. City Parks staff are removing Milk thistle from public lands and are asking residents to help remove this nasty alien invader should they see it in their garden.

What It Looks Like

Milk thistle is a robust, branching winter annual/biennial plant that reaches up to two metres in height. It produces one large, pink-purple flower per stem and has spines along the stems and leaf edges. Heavy spines surround the flower head (see above photos). Milk thistle has distinctive white marbling patterns on shiny green leaves.

One plant can produce over 6,000 seeds in just one year. It can also overwinter as a rosette of green leaves close to the ground. While the plant flowers, its seeds fall nearby and are spread by erosion, animals, rain and human activity. Fall rains help germinate the seeds, however, seeds can lie dormant in the soil for at least nine years.

What Harm Does the Plant Do?

When not controlled, Milk thistle can produce ten tonnes of foliage per hectare, pushing out native and rare plants in sensitive areas. Milk thistle can also cause nitrate poisoning in animals such as cattle and sheep.

Where Is It Located?

Milk thistle has a limited distribution in Greater Victoria. In Victoria, the area around Haegert Park is the only site where Milk thistle has been spotted. The plant may have been imported to the area as a garden plant or part of a seed contaminant.

A new invader to British Columbia, Milk thistle grows in both sun and shade, and in moist and dry locations. Plants germinate well in roadsides, ditches and newly disturbed garden beds. They can also quickly spread to natural areas such as Garry Oak meadows.

What You Can Do

If you see Milk thistle on public lands, please report it to City Parks staff to prevent this invader from spreading. You can also help by checking for this noxious weed on your property and removing it.

When To Remove It?

The time to remove Milk thistle is in April and early May, before the plant goes to seed.

How To Remove and Dispose?

- For small areas with few plants, pull or dig up rosettes and plants which have begun to grow upright stems, before seed heads form. Use a shovel to cut the plant off about 2.5 centimetres below the ground so the plant will not re-sprout. Chopping the leaves from one side of a rosette can provide access to the central growing point.
- **CAUTION:** Wear protective clothing to avoid puncture wounds from the spines. To be fully effective, all mature seed heads need to be bagged and removed so no new seeds remain. Immature seeds can still continue to develop in cut plants, and the less stem that remains attached to the flower head, the faster the seed head will dry out.
- Place plants in sealed garbage bags, as the seeds can ripen even after they have been pulled.
- Label garbage bags as 'Milk Thistle.'
- Drop off marked bags at the City's Public Works Yard at 417 Garbally Road, on Saturdays from 7 a.m. – 2 p.m., free of charge. Proof of residency is required in the form of a valid driver's licence.

To report Milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*) in Victoria, please contact:

City of Victoria, Parks Division

T 250.361.0600

E parks@victoria.ca

