Illyrian thistle

Common name: Illyrian thistle

Scientific name: *Onopordum illyricum* L.

Other scientific name/s:

Other common name/s:

**Plant status**

Catchment management authority boundaries

- **Regionally prohibited** in the North East, Goulburn Broken, East Gippsland, Port Phillip and Western Port Catchments
- **Regionally controlled** in the North Central Catchment
- **Restricted** in the Wimmera, Glenelg Hopkins, Mallee, Corangamite and West Gippsland Catchments

Read more about the classification of invasive plants in Victoria

**Plant images**
**Plant biology**

**Appearance**  Herbaceous plant - Forb (flowering herbaceous plant - not a grass)

**Description**  Illyrian thistle is an erect annual or biennial herb growing to a height of 2 m.

**Stems**  Stems are erect, woolly and whitish in colour. They are very prominently winged, spiny and branched near the top.

Illyrian thistle leaves are densely woolly and a whitish colour. They have deep lobes, coarse teeth, and spines on the margins.

**Leaves**  Leaf bases continue down the stems as wings.

Rosette leaves can grow to 30 cm long.

Illyrian thistle has purple florets with globular heads that grow to 8 cm in diameter, including numerous bracts.

**Flowers**  Bracts are large, broad, purple and end in sharp yellow spines with outer bracts reflexed.

No fruit.

**Fruit**  The seeds of Illyrian thistle are light brown to grey, 5-7 mm long and have minute pits over the surface.

**Seeds**  They are quadrangular in shape and are transversely wrinkled and flattened.

The pappus holds a collection of silky feathery hairs 8-10 mm long.

**Growth and lifecycle**

**Method of reproduction and dispersal**  Illyrian thistle's only method of dispersal is by seed which is equipped with a pappus of fine hairs and is spread by both wind and water.

**Rate of growth and spread**  Illyrian thistle spreads rapidly and is competitive in weak pastures. Increasing soil fertility favours its establishment and growth.

Seedlings germinate at any time of the year but predominately after autumn rains. Growth slows during winter. Rapid growth occurs during spring. Plants may flower in the first year of growth but is generally delayed till the second summer.

**Seedbank propagule persistence**  Illyrian thistle is a prolific seeder, with usually five flowering heads producing 200 seeds per flower.
Preferred habitat

Illyrian thistle prefers moderately warm environments such as rocky hillsides in subhumid temperate regions. In Australia it is confined to areas of winter-dominant rainfall with an annual total of 600-800 mm, and occurs on neglected sites and pastures of reasonable fertility.

The weed can also tolerate periods of drought due to its large tap-root.

Distribution

There are very few known infestations of this weed in Victoria.

Growth calendar

The icons on the calendar below represent the times of year for flowering, seeding, germination, the dormancy period of Illyrian thistle and also the optimum time for treatment.

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Impact

Impact on ecosystems and waterways

Illyrian thistle's presence in natural ecosystems can reduce forage for native fauna.

Agricultural and economic impacts

The seeds contaminate wool, other agricultural produce and equipment. The plant is likely to be troublesome in annual clover pastures, particularly those which are left bare at the end of summer as this enables seedlings to establish with little competition.

Illyrian thistle tends not to be grazed by stock because of its dense spines. However, if the weed is grazed, the spines can cause damage, particularly around the mouths and eyes of animals.

This weed is known to form hybrids with other Onopordum species which may be more invasive and problematic in agricultural systems.
Social value and health impacts

Dense patches can pose a barrier to humans and animals and possibly impact some recreational activities.

Management

Prescribed measures for the control of noxious weeds

- Application of a registered herbicide
- Physical removal

Important information about prescribed measures for the control of noxious weeds

Other management techniques

Changes in land use practices and spread prevention may also support Illyrian thistle management after implementing the prescribed measures above.

References


Department of Primary Industries, Illyrian Thistle Regionally Prohibited Weed Fact Sheet, 2010