

News Column

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MUSK THISTLE

If you didn't grow up on a farm, you might find joy in the beauty of those pretty purple flowers we are starting to see along roadsides and in pastures. They flower every year in June and if you didn't know what they were, you could be amazed by their abundant beauty.

We all know what they are though, and we see right past the beauty. We see sweat, labor, and long days of hard work. We see time wasted when there is hay to bale and crops to plant. We see a nuisance.

Those musk thistle blooms probably do appear beautiful to the folks who didn't grow up chopping thistles hour after hour, and day after day, in the June heat. I wasted about a week of my life every year during my high school and college days, at the start of my summer break, digging thistles.

I honestly can't say that my thistle digging days were a waste of time because I learned some great life lessons from that project. I learned the value of sun screen and the importance of drinking lots of water. And I experienced the exhilarating feeling of completing what appeared to be a never-ending task.

Maybe the most important lesson I learned from my days of labor is that it is easier to do a job when it should be done instead of putting it off until it has to be done. Controlling thistles earlier in the season, when they are in the seedling or rosette stages, is much easier than pulling heads and hand-digging.

Musk thistles are best controlled in the seedling or rosette stage. 2,4-D, dicamba, and picloram (Tordon) are all effective on rosettes. Products containing metsulfuron, chlorsulfuron, and aminopyralid are also effective on musk thistle.

Once plants have bolted, combinations of the above products can still be effective. However, once they have started to bloom, herbicides are not likely to be effective in eliminating seed production. Metsulfuron has been shown to reduce seed viability when applied at the bloom stage but it is unlikely all seed production will be eliminated.

So,....now that musk thistles have bloomed, the best way to control them is manual labor. Mowing just as the flowers start to appear can prevent flowers from producing seeds, but once the flowers are fully purple they will produce seed even if the plants are dug and left to die.

When I tackle this project I go out with an old feed bag, a shovel, and a leather glove. I pop flowers off with a gloved hand and stuff them in the bag, then dig the thistle an inch or two below the ground surface. If the flowers are left on the plant, they will mature and produce seed.

You can cut heads off with a hand pruner or a knife, but that is way too much work. The leather glove method is much faster. Just grab and pull – heads will pop right off.

Trust me – I have done this far too many times.

I said earlier that I learned the lesson of doing things on time, so you should be wondering why I have so much practice. Let's just say I'm a slow learner. And there are always a few thistles that somehow escape the early control.

Most thistles emerge in the fall, so if you know might want to mark the spot that gets away from you this spring. Come fall, you can spray that area with just 2,4-D and eliminate most of the thistles you would have finally noticed when they headed in June of the next year.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-

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