

A Thistle Wildfire

by Carol Rawle

Here we are on the verge of fall and there are little bits of fluff floating in the air resembling light snow flurries. But just the opposite of snow, this floating fluff could more aptly be characterized as burning embers floating down to start wildfires of new thistle colonies on your property and mine.

One thistle plant has the potential to throw off enough seed to start several hundred new plants almost immediately. Just as a wildfire is much easier to bring under control when caught small, it goes without saying that one plant is easier to deal with today than a few hundred plants next spring. And since there is almost never a single thistle plant, you can multiply that by any number and get a nightmare.

This year, we have been cursed by the disruption to our lives by a deadly pandemic, and blessed by generous rainfall. At the same time, our ranch is also being blessed with many new property owners excited to become a part of our community and anticipating enjoying and learning about the natural beauty of their new home. The combination of these factors has resulted in a crop of noxious weeds unseen in recent years.

Driving our ranch roads recently has me recalling the latter 1990s when our POA declared thistle to be a community issue and not merely a problem for individual property owners. At that time, thistle along our roadways was as plentiful as foxtail and sunflowers are now. The thistle is again showing potential of being that kind of problem, but the thistle today isn't mostly along the right-of-ways. It can be seen as large fields on individual lots. The new property owners I've spoken to about it are nearly universally unaware of what thistle is and what it could represent - a serious problem that can ruin land for grazing for both wildlife and cattle and ruin property values. Other residents seem to be unaware of the explosion of thistle on their property where there have never been any or just a few in the past.





Whether you are a long time resident of the Santa Fe Trail Ranch or a new property owner, the first step out of your house tomorrow morning should be to take a little stroll across the sunny areas of your property to see if you have any of these noxious plants. Gaze over the area in your line of sight. If you see plants three feet tall with pretty pink or purple flowers or flowers going white with seed fluff, congratulations, you have thistle.

Next, slowly stroll randomly with your eyes on the ground. Do you see pancake flat dark-green, or grey-green, or grass-green rosettes from a couple inches in diameter to six or even ten inches in diameter with jagged leaf edges? Those are brand new thistle plants that will flower next spring before you've even broken out your gardening tools. These are thistle that are easiest to deal with. Those that are three feet tall will require a bit more effort. But any effort you make now will pay off in far, far fewer thistle come spring.





The first step if you find any mature flowering thistle plants a couple feet tall is to buy yourself some time by snipping the flower heads as well as all of the unopened seed heads which can become flowers and seed fluff in a matter of a few days. Wear leather gloves as the spines of a thistle plant are very painful to human skin. Bag them, including all the thistle down already fallen onto the ground that you can pick up, and then tie the bag shut so they can't escape. In past years, I've even gone so far as to use a hand-vac to vacuum up fallen thistle seed on the ground. You are permitted and even encouraged to dispose of these closed bags of thistle heads in the ranch dumpsters.

The next step is to spray all the thistle plants you can find with an herbicide. One of the best and most efficient is a product called Milestone, which can be ordered from Big R. The advantage of using this herbicide rather than the popular Roundup is that it's

much safer and it does everything Roundup does plus it has residual action in the soil for around a month after spraying that can kill any thistle seed that chooses to germinate during that window.

When you come to a mature thistle plant, no need to spray the entire plant. After snipping all the flower and unopened seed heads, cut the stalk down to just a few inches from soil level leaving just a few leaves at the base. Spray those and the cut stump and that will take care of it. Next, since most thistle seed lands at the base of the mother plant and within ten feet downwind or downhill of it, lightly spray the soil there. That will take care of any seed fluff you've missed that may germinate over the next four or five weeks.

Spray all thistle rosettes as you find them. It is very easy to miss some, so a strategy of spraying the first rosette you come to and then searching in an outward spiral for others is most likely to find the most. In a week when the first spraying has resulted in killing a good number of plants, I walk again with my sprayer to find any plants I may have missed the first time.

There are several different species of thistle on the Santa Fe Trail Ranch, the three most common being Canada thistle, Scotch thistle, and bull thistle. They are all killed by spraying with herbicide. However, Canada thistle is the most sinister of the lot. If a plant can have cunning, Canada thistle is it.

Other thistle is colored in a way they are easily spotted growing among grass and other plants. They stand out. Not so Canada thistle. It is colored the same green as grass and blends in so well, you can stroll across a meadow and not notice it under your feet in the rosette stage. For that reason, I like to hunt it down in spring and fall when the grass is usually brown and dead. The bright green color really stands out against brown grass. As long as the night time temps are above freezing and the days are in the high 60s or 70s, herbicide will be effective.

Canada thistle also has a double strategy for propagation. It reproduces by a vast underground interconnected root system as well as by casting off seeds from flower heads. A word of warning about that root system, don't try to dig these plants up to save on herbicide. Even a sliver of root left in the soil has the capability to develop into a new plant. Also, Canada thistle loves to hide under oak brush. If you see Canada thistle near oak brush, be sure to check the oak brush for this sneaky thistle plant in its midst.



The Santa Fe Trail Ranch has an organized volunteer noxious weed spraying program to control thistle along our vast system of roadways. Herbicide is purchased by the POA and distributed to the volunteers for this purpose. The program is overseen by ranch resident volunteers. For more info, go to santafetrailranch.com, position your cursor over "Community" at the top of the home page, then click on "Weed Control" to see an overview of the program and a link to an owners-only article with more details and contact info for the volunteers. Once you get your own thistle under control, you are welcome to adopt a road

section and help keep our roadsides free of thistle.

In addition to thistle, there are a number of other noxious weeds that you will want to learn about so they don't crowd out the grasses and other wild flowers on your property. With their aggressive Velcro-like seeds that stick to dogs, cats, cows, horses, deer, and your socks and pants, they are able to travel far and wide to spread their misery. Often, new property owners are fooled into thinking they are desirable plants because of a very brief pretty flower. These include hounds tongue, white horehound, stick tight, and bursage. One more warning, your wild bird seed may contribute to your thistle problem. Check that it doesn't contain thistle seed before you buy and use it.

I am always eager to answer any questions about weeds from any property owner at any time. My contact info can be found by logging onto santafetrailranch.com and using the Property Search tool on the Dashboard to look me up.