

Maltese Starthistle

Invasive Species Alert Sheet

Capital Region Invasive Species Program



Above: Maltese Starthistle flower heads and distribution.

The spread of non-native invasive plants has serious ecological, economic and health impacts.

Local governments and partners are asking for help from all residents to report and monitor **Maltese Starthistle** (*Centaurea melitensis*) on both public and private lands. Homeowners can manage this plant themselves or reach out to professionals for support.

Maltese Starthistle is native to northern Africa and southern Europe in the western Mediterranean region. Now an invasive species in North America, this annual plant in the sunflower family colonises grasslands, rangelands, open woodlands, and roadsides. Although it is not yet widespread in the capital region, it is important to develop awareness and management practices to ensure it does not spread. Once established, it forms dense, spiny thickets that are difficult to control. In the CRD, Georgeson Island, off Mayne Island has the largest local population.

Caution: This plant may cause “chewing disease” a neurological disorder in horses if the flowering heads are consumed.

Why is Maltese Starthistle a problem?

- **Crowds out native vegetation** by forming dense, impenetrable stands that reduce forage for wildlife and livestock, and can impact native ecosystems.

- **Spines on flower heads** can limit hiking and other recreational land uses, and livestock grazing, leading to dominance in natural areas or grazed pastures.
- **Can cause a neurological disease** in horses.
- **Spreads rapidly** via seeds transported by vehicles, animals, humans, and birds.
- **Seed bank can remain viable for up to 10 years.**

What does it look like?

- **Stems:** Erect, winged, gray green, up to 1m tall.
- **Leaves:** Basal rosette in winter/spring; lobed at the base and narrow near the tip; prickly hairs and resinous glands present.
- **Flowers:** Small yellow flower heads (roughly 1cm long) with short spines; bloom July–September.
- **Seeds:** Small, tan to gray, striped; up to 60 per flower head.
- **Roots:** Deep taproot.

Could be confused with?

- **INVASIVE Yellow Starthistle** (*Centaurea solstitialis*): Similar in appearance but with larger flowers and longer spines.

Habitat and biology

- Winter annual, occasionally biennial in the family Asteraceae
- Found in disturbed areas—roadsides, fields, open woodlands, pastures.
- Adapted to many soil types
- Spreads through adherence to humans, animals and vehicle undercarriages.

What should you do if you spot Malthese Starthistle?

- **Prevent:** Avoid driving or hiking through infested areas. Check and clean equipment, vehicles, and animals after exposure.
- **Report:** Report all outbreaks to the contacts below for support and monitoring.
- **Remove:** If you have an outbreak on your property, follow the instructions below for careful removal and follow up. Work to prevent and limit further spread.
- **Monitor:** Monitor for outbreaks, especially during bloom time (April to September)

For small infestations

- **Manual removal:** Hand-pulling or hoeing is effective before seeds set. Remove as much of the taproot as possible.
- **Replant:** Re-vegetate cleared areas with native species.



- **Monitor and re-treat:** Return annually to remove regrowth.

For large infestations

- **Mechanical:** Repeated tilling when soil is dry can reduce regrowth.
- **Mowing:** Only mow when plants are in the early flower stage. Improper timing may increase seed production.
- **Grazing:** In early spring, sheep, goats, and cattle can graze on yellow starthistle before its spines emerge. Goats are especially useful, as they will continue to feed on the plant even once it becomes spiny or begins to flower.
- **Fire:** Prescribed burning in the rosette or early flower stage may help reduce populations. Check with local fire department first and adhere to all local and provincial regulations.
- **Chemical:** Herbicides may be helpful depending on local and provincial regulations.

Proper disposal

- **Do not compost:** Seed heads and roots may survive.
- **Garbage only:** Place all plant material in sealed garbage bags. Label as "invasive species" and dispose at Hartland Landfill.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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