INVASIVE SPECIES ALERT!

Italian thistle
(*Carduus pycnocephalus*)

Flowering Italian thistle
Photo: Franz Xaver

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS PLANT?

DESCRIPTION

- Annual or biennial short-lived plant that is native to northern Africa, south-western Europe, and Asia.
- Can grow up to 2.5 m tall.
- Stems are slightly woolly, spiny and winged.
- Upper side of leaves is nearly hairless; underside of leaves is covered in fine, cobwebby hairs.
- Leaves are pinnately lobed into spiny-lobed segments with a prominent terminal spine.
- Flowers are pink or purple with stiff, upright bracts present at the base of flowerheads.
- Flowerheads are narrow and in terminal clusters of 1 to 5.
- Seeds are 4 to 6 mm long, light brown to brown with veins and hairs on one end.

PRIMARY THREATS: Italian thistle invades pastures and rangeland crowding out native plants and desirable forage for livestock. Soil disturbance will trigger germination of this species.

Lobed leaves with woolly underside
Photo: Harry Rose

BIOLOGY & SPREAD

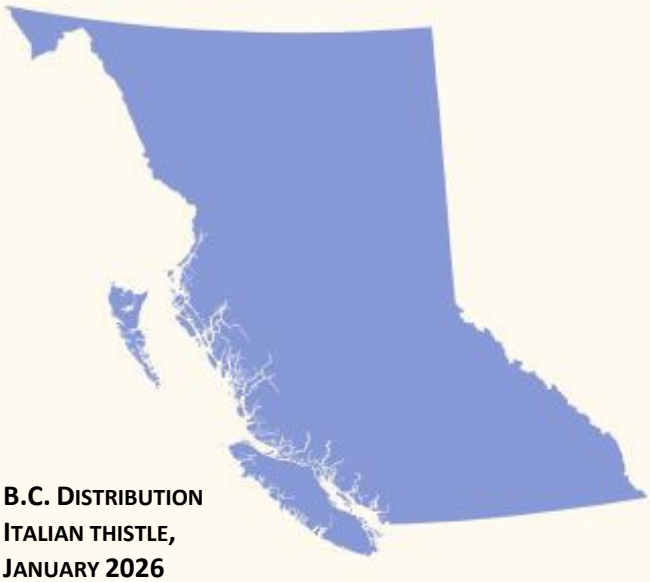
- Italian thistle reproduces primarily by seed which can remain viable in soil for up to 10 years.
- A single plant can produce 20,000 seeds per growing season.
- Seeds can be dispersed long distances by wind.
- Disturbance can stimulate aggressive growth.
- Overwinters as a rosette forming dense patches that outcompete spring establishment of native species.

For more information:
https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/plants-animals-ecosystems/invasive-species/priority-species/priority-plants

BRITISH COLUMBIA

January 2026

Italian thistle (*Carduus pycnocephalus*)



B.C. Distribution Italian thistle, January 2026

Habitat

- Italian thistle prefers dry, open areas such as pastures rangeland, grasslands, rights-of-way, roadsides and waste areas.

Distribution & Status

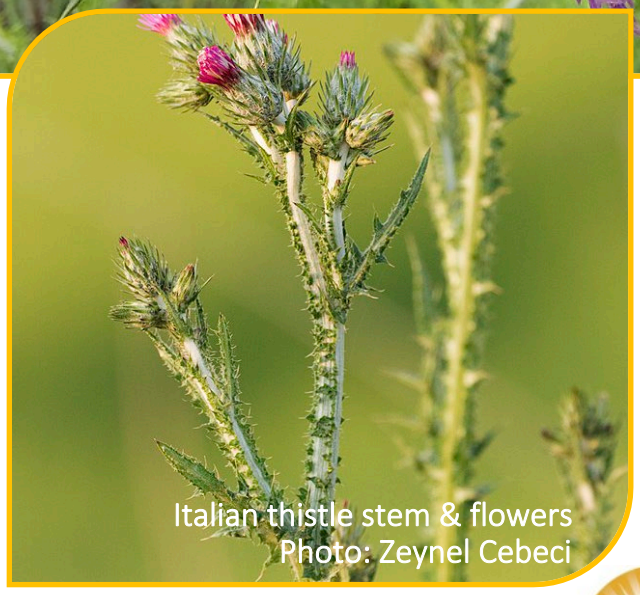
- Italian thistle has not yet been established in British Columbia, but scattered infestations have been reported in the United States.
- Management goal is prevention of introduction and establishment.

Cluster of flowerheads with bracts at base
Photo: Anna Massini

Report Invasive Species

Download the App!

www.gov.bc.ca/invasive-species



Italian thistle stem & flowers
Photo: Zeynel Cebeci

What Can You Do?

- **REPORT** new sightings
- **Use** clean grain, hay, and straw
- **Maintain** healthy and diverse pastures
- **Clean** tools, equipment, and machinery
- **Treat** invasive species before disturbing a site with digging, mowing, or machinery

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