

Nodding thistle

Carduus nutans

Family Asteraceae



Identification

- Annual or biennial thistle with red/purple flowers that appear from November to February.
- Flowers held on tall flower stalks (75 cm or more tall) and can droop down nodding in the wind.
- The flowerhead is surrounded by spiny-tipped, small, scale-like leaves that curve backwards.
- Leaves are deeply divided into triangular lobes with spiny tips.
Leaves have a whitish midrib near where the leaf meets the stem.
- The rosette leaves (at the base of the thistle) are narrow and lobed with spiny edges.



Nodding thistle rosette. Photo: G. Bradfield (ECan)

Status

Nodding thistle is classified as a 'Containment Control pest' in the Canterbury Regional Pest Management Strategy (2005-2015). Strategy rules require land occupiers to clear nodding thistle at least 40 m from neighbouring boundaries, stock water and irrigation races.

Biocontrol agents

There are a number of insect biocontrol agents that can reduce nodding thistle vigour. These include the nodding thistle crown weevil, receptacle weevil and gall fly. For more information on biocontrol agents refer to www.landcareresearch.co.nz.



Nodding thistle flowers. Photo: G. Bradfield (ECan)

Where is it found?

Nodding thistle is common throughout the North and South Islands (except Westland). Abundant in summer, it grows in pasture, lucerne and crop plantings, waste places and road sides.

Why is it a problem?

Nodding thistle can form dense stands of up to 150 000 plants per hectare. It obstructs livestock movement and prevents access to neighbouring pasture plants. Mature plants can produce up to 10 000 seeds per plant which have a high germination viability (60-80%) and can survive in the soil for a long time. It can also be an issue for certified seed growers as seed contaminated with nodding thistle cannot be exported.



Adult nodding thistle plant. Photo: G. Bradfield (ECan)