

Year Round Gardening

My Battle with Noxious Weeds

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Since 2015, I have battled the noxious weeds on our Black Forest property; specifically, Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*), Diffuse knapweed (*Centaurea diffusa*) and Common mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*). I have not won this war, but currently, there are no large patches of these weeds on my land.

A noxious weed is an alien (non-native) plant which causes damage to agricultural or natural ecosystems. The plant must have been designated as noxious by a governmental body to be included as a noxious species. Landowners are required to control designated species under Colorado State Law. Acceptable controls can range from simply preventing spread to mandatory eradication, What a landowner is required to do depends on the specific weed. El Paso County has an excellent pamphlet available– Noxious Weeds and Control Methods available online at <https://communityservices.elpasoco.com/wp-content/uploads/Environmental-Division-Picture/Noxious-Weeds/Noxious-Weed-Control-Book.pdf>.



Newt sitting by some Mullein

Weeds can spread readily via dispersal of seeds, producing thousands of seeds per plant in a season. Common mullein can produce in excess of 200,000 seeds per plant! Those seeds are viable for decades. They germinate when the soil temperature is within an appropriate range and there is sufficient oxygen and water, generally in disturbed soil.

I use only manual methods (pulling and digging) to eradicate the weeds on our property. This method has been successful, but it is not a one-and-done. From May through October- I prowl for weeds on my walk almost daily walks. The Canada thistle is especially stubborn. It reproduces from the buds in its root system and seeds. I have to repeatedly dig the thistle in the same area. However, once repeatedly dug during a growing season it does not generally appear in the same area the following year.

All weeds identified as noxious can be controlled with herbicides. An integrated strategy of prevention, cultural practices, biological, mechanical and chemical controls may be needed for heavy, persistent noxious weed infestations. Consult the Colorado Department of Agriculture for chemical recommendations.

An interesting approach with less exertion is employing biologicals – insects, diseases and grazing animals to reduce the impact of the weeds. Biological controls will limit spread but will not eradicate weeds.

Although not identified as a noxious weed, I have seen many more Russian thistles (*Salsola tragus L.*) this year. Many readers may know Russian thistle by the common name “tumbleweed.” In autumn the plant dries, it breaks off at the root, spreading its seeds as it tumbles in the wind. During the windy winter months 2017-2018 I collected many bags of tumbleweeds. I always looked for seeds, but unfortunately, they had already dropped. This really demonstrated to me how important it is to ensure that weeds do not go to seed. If I want to have even limited success at weed control, preventing seed production is vital first step.

My battle plan for controlling noxious weeds preferentially focuses on pulling and digging. This provides other benefits – I walk many steps a day and get lots of fresh air. Being out and about on the property also gives me an opportunity to chat with the neighbors.

When you have questions, Colorado State University Extension has research-based answers. Get answers to your horticulture questions by visiting ask.extension.org.