Canada thistle-tough weed to control

NEWARK, Del. – The Canada thistle is an aggressive perennial weed that thrives in Delaware and is rapidly spreading into the state's agricultural lands. Each year more and more colonies of this weed appear, crowding out crops with their dense, spiny-leaved growth. Wherever heavy infestations occur, they're likely to seriously reduce crop yields.

The plant reaches a height of four or five feet and once established, can spread quickly to other parts of a field. Its spread is much more rapid than many other weeds because of its double-barreled method of reproduction. First, its abundant lavender flowerheads produce quantities of seeds which are carried through the air on elaborate bristly plumes, or "parachutes."

As if this weren't enough, the plant also has a vigorous underground root system which, like Johnsongrass, spreads out horizontally, starting new plants as it goes. These roots are scattered over a field during tillage operations, and each piece is capable of starting a new thistle patch.

This two-fold method of reproduction makes the Canada thistle tough to control, as any farmer knows who's tried to keep it out of his fields.

University of Delaware Extension crops specialist Frank Webb has drawn up some recommendations for dealing with this persistent plant pest.

For spot control in corn, soybeans, wheat, barley, oats and sorghum he advises using the herbicide Roundup on actively growing thistle plants. Best results occur when the weed is over 10 inches high and in the early bud stage. One should avoid treatment during drought and/or extreme temperature conditions, he cautions.

Treatment in growing crops must be made prior to heading of small grains and sorghum, initial pod set on soybeans, or silking of corn.

Special care must be taken when spot treating with Roundup in growing crops. The herbicide is not selective and will kill all vegetation in the treated area. If some of the chemical drifts outside the target area, crop plants may be killed there, too.

Since the product does not provide residual weed control, Canada thistle sprouting from seeds or unaffected underground root stock will continue to grow.

Roundup can also be used broadcast either before planting or after harvest of any crop, as long as Canada thistle is actively growing and is in the proper state of growth. Wait three or more days after treatment before performing any soil tillage. Following this waiting period it is safe to plant any crop, since there is no carry-over of the chemical in soils after application.

Another herbicide that can be used for thistle control in field corn is Banvel. This, too, should be put on after thisite plants are 10 inches tall or taller. Application may be made over the top of corn until the crop is approximately 30 inches tall. Taller corn should be sprayed with drop nozzles, says Webb. One should not treat corn with Banvel within 15 days of tassel emergence.

The crops specialist recommends using a planned program of cultivation, cropping and spraying as the most effective way to eliminate Canada thistle from cropland and the same time maintain a high level of production. He urges growers to be on the lookout for the appearance of this problem weed in their fields. Early detection can reduce the cost and complexity of control procedures.

To help farmers succeed in combating this weed, Webb has prepared a fact sheet entitled "Canada Thistle Control." Free copies are available from the county Extension office in Newark, Dover or Georgetown, or by writing: Mail Room, Agricultural Hall, University of Delaware, Newark, Del. 19711.

Controlled burning useful in wildlife management

UNIVERSITY PARK — Controlled burning can improve "worn out" forests choked with overmature trees of little value, making such woodlands better habitats for birds and animals as well, according to wildlife managers at the Pennsylvania State University.

Perhaps the greatest advantage to this prescribed burning is the opportunity to control natural sprouting of scrub species, said John F. Sidelinger, former graduate assistant in wildlife management at Penn State.

"When used carefully and under proper weather and fuel conditions, prescribed burning can be an efficient management tool for improving woodlands," he affirmed.

The two-year study was carried out on areas burned by the Pennsylvania Game Commission, State Game Lands 176 in Centre County. Fire killed the above portions of shrubs. However, the root collars remained alive. The result was an abundance of basal shoots that sprouted from root collars and increased the stems per acre to six times that of stems on unburned areas.

The new sprouts grew more vigorously than shrubs in unburned areas. It was thought that ashes from the fires acted as fertilizer for increased growth. The improved growth also provided abundant, easily reached browse for deer and added new escape areas and nesting cover for birds.

Trembling aspen and bigtooth aspen were the tree species most often killed by fire. However, aspen root stock remained alive and produced abundant root suckers. Shrub-nesting songbirds increased after the burning. Many small mammals were also more abundant on burned sites. Game animals — whitetail deer, cottontail rabbits, and ruffed grouse — preferred the burned areas. Red-backed voles, chipmunks, and squirrels were more plentiful on unburned areas.

At times, other methods of improving wildlife habitat may be as useful as controlled burning. Sidelinger listed bulldozing, mechanical crushing of trees, extensive brush cutting, and "chaining" — using chains to pull down weed trees.