

Md. lawmakers fight thistles

ANNAPOLIS, Md — Thistles are thriving like never before in Maryland. And the growing menace of these prickly crop-chokers is causing concern in agricultural circles that has reached all the way to the state legislature in Annapolis.

Major offenders are the Canada thistle and the musk or nodding thistle, notes Ronald I. Ritter, Extension weed control specialist and assistant professor of agronomy at the University of Maryland.

A generation ago, these two weeds were virtually unknown in Maryland, Ritter commented. The musk thistle was imported by accident from Europe, and the Canada thistle has been progressively moving southward since the turn of the century from our neighbor to the north.

New cropping practices by farmers, changes in roadside mowing procedures by highway maintenance crews and the chronic problem of tracts of idle

land awaiting development, have all contributed to the rapid population buildup of these two thistles throughout the state during recent years.

Other contributors to the thistle problem are utility rights-of-way and abandoned railroad trackage. Last year's semi-drought weather conditions were also favorable for thistle growth.

In addition, Maryland has had no natural insect predators which control thistle populations by attacking the seed-bearing flower heads. But such predators are now starting to be introduced.

Like most members of their plant family, the Canada and musk thistle usually bear purplish flowers throughout the summer - although white flowers are sometimes seen, particularly on the Canada thistle.

Both of these thistles are prolific seed producers, and they spread by having each seed attached to a plume which allows the seed to be carried long distances by the wind.

flower head than the Canada thistle. Because the head bends over when mature, the plant is often referred to as the nodding thistle. It is a biennial plant, which infers a two-year life span and reproduction only from seeds. This means that it can be fairly well eradicated in one growing season of chemical and cultural multi-treatment.

The Canada thistle, on the other hand, is a perennial weed, and its roots can survive for many years. Since it spreads both by seed and underground runners, it is more difficult to control - usually requiring at least two full growing seasons of chemical and cultural treatments.

Ritter reported that the Maryland Extension Service is currently involved in a statewide educational campaign regarding the Canada and musk thistle problem.

During March, the Extension Service cooperated with the state

Department of Agriculture and the state Department of Transportation to conduct a series of meetings for highway maintenance workers and county Extension agricultural agents.

The meetings covered origin and nature of the thistle problem, identification, and control measures. Program leaders also reported on the proposed thistle control law which is expected to be passed by the current session of the Maryland General Assembly.

If passed, the law (House Bill 1768) would go into effect on Jan. 1, 1983, making it illegal for property owners to allow thistles to go to seed.

Ritter explained that the two-year moratorium was written into the bill to allow time for an educational campaign and to test the effectiveness of natural insect predators. The time lapse would also allow for additional research on cultural and chemical control methods by University of Maryland agronomists.



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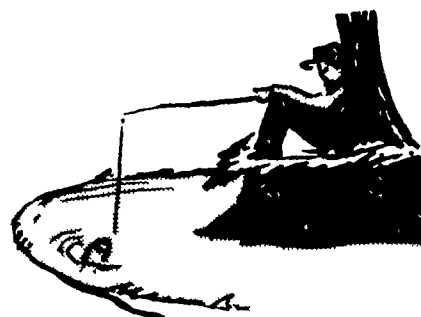
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