

# Malta Starthistle, Maltese Starthistle (*Centaurea Melitensis*)

Garry Bowman, Williamson County Master Gardener, May, 2016



Malta Starthistle

The Williamson County Help Desk has recently received a number of calls regarding an invasive plant known as Malta Starthistle which blooms from April to June. It has a yellow flower and looks similar to the Yellow Star Thistle, another invasive. It shouldn't be confused with our native Texas Thistle which has a purple flower and has beneficial aspects for butterflies, birds and some wild game.

Malta Starthistle seed production is highly variable, but a mature plant is capable of producing up to 100 spiny seed heads with each seed head containing up to 60 seeds. That is about 600 seeds per plant if conditions are right. The seeds don't always sprout the following year and some can remain dormant in the soil up to 10 years. This can mean ongoing eradication efforts for several years according to TexasInvasives.org.



Native Texas Thistle

It is a winter annual with a deep taproot. In the winter it grows next to the ground in a basal rosette form. It is similar in appearance to a Gaillardia or Indian Blanket rosette. In the spring (April-June), it sends up stems and develops flowers and seed heads with sharp spines which is when it becomes more noticeable.



Malta Starthistle Rosette



Gaillardia Rosette

For homeowners, early detection and eradication is important. Manual control with hand pulling and hoeing are effective for small infestations of Malta Starthistle, but this must be done repeatedly. Plants should be removed in early bolt before flowers have opened and gone to seed. The taproot should be removed as much as possible. (USDA, p3.)

Mowing is only effective when plants are in late bud or early bloom stage. Mowing should occur regularly (e.g., weekly or biweekly) at a level that will remove the lowest branches. Leaves should not be left below the level of the cut. Mowing at other times or not low enough may stimulate plant growth and produce side branches with more flower and seed heads. (USDA, p3.)

Chemical control with a broadleaf post emergent is most effective while it is in the rosette stage and before it has sent up flower stalks. The seedlings and rosettes usually appear between December and April) (USDA, p4.) After it has sent up a flower stalk, post emergent's aren't effective. Spot control can be done with a post emergent spray containing Glyphosate. Glyphosate can injure or kill adjacent plants or grass, so be careful in applying. Always follow label directions when applying any type of chemical. Some gardeners have used a plastic bottle with the bottom cut out and the spray head inserted into the other end to make a funnel to control overspray.

#### References:

1. TexasInvasives.org (Texas Invasives Database)  
[http://texasinvasives.org/plant\\_database/detail.php?symbol=CEME2](http://texasinvasives.org/plant_database/detail.php?symbol=CEME2)
2. USDA Forest Service, Field Guide for Managing Malta Starthistle in the Southwest  
[http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5410119.pdf](http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5410119.pdf)

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