



Government  
of South Australia

# WEED IDENTIFICATION NOTES

ANIMAL AND PLANT CONTROL COMMISSION

## VARIEGATED THISTLE



*Variegated thistle infestation on roadside*



*Rosette leaves*



*Closeup of flower head and  
stem leaves*

# VARIEGATED THISTLE



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Variegated thistle, *Silybum marianum*, is an annual herb native to the Mediterranean region, and was probably introduced to Australia for medicinal purposes. Also known as St Mary's thistle, milk thistle or bull thistle, it is a very competitive pasture weed. It is important to keep variegated thistle off clean properties or to recognise and destroy new infestations before they become established.

## Distribution

Eyre Peninsula	- isolated plants
Northern pastoral	- isolated patches in towns only
Northern ag districts / Yorke Peninsula	- isolated plants, more common in higher rainfall areas
Murray Mallee	- small isolated patches
South East	- scattered in upper south east, widespread in lower south east
Central region	- scattered patches in higher rainfall areas

## Impacts

Once established, variegated thistle will eliminate most plants by shading and competition for moisture and nutrients. It is unpalatable and not readily grazed by stock unless sprayed or cut, of little nutritional value and becomes poisonous by accumulating nitrates under certain conditions. The spines of the plant can cause physical injury, and restrict stock movement. Dense stands of variegated thistle may also harbour vermin.

The flowers of variegated thistle provide a source of pollen for the honey industry and other parts of the plant have been used in the past for medicinal purposes.

## Recognition

Variegated thistle is an erect annual or biennial herb to 2.5 m tall with a thick taproot. Stems are branched from the base, thick but hollow or full of pith, ribbed with small spines and often also downy with cobwebby hairs. Leaves have a shiny, mottled dark green/light green (variegated) upper surface and a slightly hairy lower surface; they are deeply divided into toothed segments with many short spines along the edges. Lower leaves are 20 - 50 cm long, forming a rosette at ground level; stem leaves are smaller.

Flowering heads are round and 4 - 8 cm in diameter, packed with 50 - 200 purple florets. Many bracts to 5 cm long protrude from the head ending in spines. Seeds are 6 - 8 mm long, shiny, mottled black and grey. Many fine bristles to 2 cm long are joined together in a ring attached to one end of the seed.

## Biology

Variegated thistle prefers heavy, fertile soils with high nitrogen and also needs bare or disturbed ground to germinate. A dry summer followed by a wet autumn appears to provide the most suitable conditions for germination and establishment.

Variegated thistle reproduces only by seeds, which germinate after autumn rain but can remain viable in the soil for up to 9 years. It overwinters as small rosettes, then makes rapid growth of larger leaves in spring before producing flowering stems. Flowering starts in October and continues into early summer. Plants die during summer but dry stems may remain standing for several months.

Further Information:

Parsons, W.T. & Cuthbertson, E.G. (2000). *Noxious Weeds of Australia*. 2nd edn. Inkata Press.

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**For more advice on recognising and controlling variegated thistle, contact your local Animal and Plant Control Board:**



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