

Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*)

DESCRIPTION:

A medicinal herb that was brought over from Europe in the mid-1700s, mullein is a biennial plant in the figwort family. It was originally introduced in Virginia for use as a piscicide (fish pesticide) and spread quickly throughout the United States. The plant is now commonly found on weedy lots, roadsides and disturbed sites where it adapts easily to a wide variety of site conditions. It is especially well adapted to dry, rocky conditions. Due to its considerable size and prolific seed production, even a handful of mullein plants can dominate a site quickly. The seeds can persist in the ground and remain viable for decades, so this species is difficult to eradicate once established. It is also an unattractive plant for wildlife due to the soft, fine hairs on the leaves. However this same quality has given rise to the nickname “backpackers toilet paper” since its soft leaves can come in very handy in a time of need.

-2
Persistent
Weed

IDENTIFICATION:

First year mullein plants are low-growing rosettes with light-green, densely pubescent leaves which have the texture of velvet. Plants bolt into maturity the second year, attaining a height of 5 to 10 ft. and have alternate, overlapping, felt-like leaves. Pale yellow flowers bloom from the base to the tip of a tall spike from June to August. The stiff stalks of larger plants can continue to flower into October, and often stay standing well into winter.

CONTROL METHODS:

Organic: Due to its relatively shallow tap roots, small numbers of these plants can often be easily dug or pulled out in loose soil. For larger individuals, cut the root below the soil surface, then remove the entire plant. This should be done prior to seed development. If seed capsules are present, cut entire seed head and immediately place it into a bag and remove from site. It is important to minimize soil disturbance since loose soil can facilitate mullein seed germination. Mullein may also be mowed repeatedly to prevent stalk from flowering. However, if mowing is discontinued, a much larger basal rosette will regrow with additional branching and higher quantities of flowers and seeds.

Chemical: Young mullein rosettes can be killed with a foliar spray of glyphosate solution (RoundUp®, etc.) and its large leaves make for excellent chemical absorption. However, the herbicide must be applied with enough volume and vigor to penetrate the thick hairs on the leaves. A broadleaf specific herbicide containing triclopyr (Garlon®) or clopyralid (Transline®) is an effective alternative if native or other desirable grasses are present. A surfactant additive is essential for successful application due to the hairy surface of the leaves.

Always read herbicide labels carefully before use and always apply according to the instruction on the product label.



First year rosette



Mullein population

Photo: /crwma.co.crook.or.us/NoxiousWeeds/



www.fcps.edu/common_mullein.htm

NATIVE ALTERNATIVES:

Along with early prevention and minimizing seed production, a good measure to reduce the spread of mullein is to provide a competitive, diverse, productive native plant community. Sowing affected sites with native prairie grass and forb seed mix can reduce mullein distribution. Contact us for specific recommendations.

