

Sow Thistle (*Sonchus* spp.)

DESCRIPTION:

Sow thistles are common, weedy members of the sunflower family originally from Eurasia and north Africa. They have been spread (presumably unintentionally) to every American state and Canadian province. Though they do not invade intact natural areas, they can be aggressive weeds of disturbed soil such as urban waste areas, roadsides, over-grazed pastures and field edges, and can be a pest in gardens, agricultural fields and new prairie plantings. Sow thistles in many ways look like a larger, more robust version of their smaller relative the dandelion. They share similar yellow flowers, fluffy, wind-dispersed seeds and milky sap. Sow thistles are typically 1' to 3' tall, but sometimes as tall as 6'. The leaves of sow thistles often fold at the base and curve distinctively downward to clasp around the stem. The flowers bloom any time from early summer through late fall. If prepared correctly the leaves are edible, but are perhaps better suited for use as fodder for rabbits and other livestock.

Common sow thistle (*Sonchus oleraceus*) and perennial sow thistle (*Sonchus arvensis*) are difficult to tell apart, however, spiny sow thistle (*Sonchus asper*) does stand out due to the sharp spines along its leaf margins. In addition to dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), wild lettuce (*Lactuca canadensis*) and prickly lettuce (*Lactuca scariola*) are similar to sow thistle. Though wild lettuce is native, it is a common, weedy biennial and all of these other plants are weeds that should be controlled. There are few desirable species which you should be concerned about confusing with sow thistle. False Dandelion (*Krigia biflora*) is similar, however it is relatively rare, only being found in high-quality prairies and savannas.

CONTROL METHODS:

Because some sow thistle species are perennial and others are annuals controlling them is not so straight forward. For small infestations they can be hand-pulled, though their stout taproots can make this difficult causing a lot of soil disturbance as the plants are uprooted. As a result it is best to tackle these plants while they are small; mature perennial sow thistle will be particularly resistant to hand-pulling. They can also be cut down with a weed whip, mower or a metal bladed hand tool but they are likely to resprout, and repeated cuttings will be needed. The broad leaves of this species make it vulnerable to treatment with organic herbicides which can top-kill the plant, but vigorous plants are likely to resprout. A glyphosate based herbicide (Round-Up®, etc.) should kill sow thistle in a single application, and may be necessary for the perennial species. However great care must be taken to avoid spraying and killing neighboring plants. Always read herbicide labels carefully before use and always apply herbicide according to the product label.



downcurved stem-clasping leaf

NATIVE

ALTERNATIVES:

Since this is a full-sun weed we recommend a diverse selection of prairie species to replace and compete against sow thistle in order to develop a more stable and productive plant community for the site. Contact us for specific recommendations.

**-1
Minor
Pest**



common sow thistle



spiny sow thistle