

NEWS RELEASE – TIMED RELEASE

July 12, 2005

UC Cooperative Extension

(209) 966-2417

Submitted by Ann Mendershausen

UCCE Master Gardener

Please Weed This!

How aware are you of the weeds in your garden, on your ranch, along the streams, and on our public lands? Fortunately most weeds are relatively benign; unfortunately, some are very invasive and are changing our landscape. Simply defined, a weed is a plant growing where it is not wanted. More technically speaking, weeds have characteristics that enable them to become invasive, and most are non-natives (exotics). The majority of California's noxious weeds are from Eurasia and North Africa, which share our Mediterranean climate. When a plant is accidentally or intentionally introduced to a new area, the natural controls in the place of origin are lacking and some of these invaders can take over.

In Mariposa the worst and most widespread weeds for both our wild and our agricultural lands are yellow star thistle, Italian thistle, tocalote, bull thistle, and Klamath weed. Also of concern are arundo or giant reed, hoary cress, and Himalayan blackberry, which inhabit moist areas. Infrequent species, but still potentially explosive, are brooms (Scotch broom and Spanish broom) and the knapweeds.

Yellow Star Thistle is blooming now and everyone can see the extent of the infestations in the county. In California, Yellow Star Thistle now covers over 15 million acres and although it first arrived during the Gold Rush, most of its expansion has been in the past 50 years. Why is this

plant so bad? It is toxic to horses, causing chewing disease, and it is impossible to walk through once the spiny seed heads have developed. It out-competes native plants and its long root system makes every year a drought year for native species. This thistle reduces bio-diversity and habitat for wildlife. Tens of thousands of seeds can be produced by one yellow star thistle plant, and each seed is viable up to ten years! This is not an easy weed to control and neither are its relatives, tocalote and Italian thistle.

Persistence is the key to success in eradicating yellow star thistle. If an infestation is small, hand pulling prior to flowering is effective. Do this every year until no more plants occur. If the infestation is larger, using a weedeater when the first few yellow flowers appear can be very successful, but again, one must persevere for years. The good news is that you will see a sharp reduction in the number of plants after a couple of years. Certain grazing regimes, particularly with goats, have proven to be effective. For information regarding herbicides appropriate for yellow star thistle contact the Mariposa County Agriculture Department or University of California Cooperative Extension. These control methods also work for tocalote and Italian thistle. The trick with these plants is that they bloom early and are less conspicuous. Obviously, using a weedeater on plants that have already set seed just helps to disperse the seed. This late in the season, if the weeds are pulled, the plants need to be bagged to prevent seed dispersal.

What can be done to help stop the spread of noxious weeds in Mariposa County? Be vigilant, learn what our worst weeds look like, and look for them. Construction equipment can transport weed seeds so be particularly observant around new house sites and roads! There is a good reason why many infestations start on roadsides. It only takes one plant capable of producing 20,000 seeds to start a major invasion. Participate in weed eradication efforts on public lands.

Don't plant potentially invasive ornamental plants such as tamarisk, broom, scarlet wisteria, tree of heaven, pampas grass, Dalmation toadflax, bachelor buttons, and mullein in your garden or on your property. Help spread the word about the need to control noxious weeds. If you have livestock, hay and straw can bring noxious weed seeds with them. Many of the worst yellow star thistle infestations in the county originated from contaminated hay. Insist on weed free hay and straw! Weeds are everyone's problem now. Be a weed buster and help keep our county beautiful.

For more information, there are some very informative web sites on weeds. The California Department of Food and Agriculture (www.cdfa.ca.gov/weedinfo), California Exotic Pest Plant Council (www.cal-ipc.org), and the University of California Davis Weed Research Center (<http://wric.ucdavis.edu>). The UC Cooperative Extension office in Mariposa County (<http://cemariposa.ucdavis.edu>) has pamphlets available and can also assist with weed identification. You can reach them at (209) 966-2417, 5009 Fairgrounds Rd., Mariposa, CA 95338.

The University of California prohibits discrimination against or harassment of any person on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, physical or mental disability, medical condition (cancer-related or genetic characteristics), ancestry, marital status, age, sexual orientation, citizenship, or status as a covered veteran (covered veterans are special disabled veterans, recently separated veterans, Vietnam era veterans, or any other veterans who served on active duty during a war or in a campaign or expedition for which a campaign badge has been authorized) in any of its programs or activities or with respect to any of its employment policies, practices, or procedures. University policy is intended to be consistent with the provisions of applicable State and Federal laws. Inquiries regarding the University's nondiscrimination policies may be directed to the Affirmative Action/Staff Personnel Services Director, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources, 300 Lakeside Drive, 6th Floor, Oakland, CA 94612-3550, (510) 987-0096.