

RANGE



Diffuse and Spotted Knapweed

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Quick Facts...

Diffuse knapweed is a biennial or, occasionally, an annual or short-lived perennial that reproduces and spreads solely from seed.

Spotted knapweed is a short-lived, noncreeping perennial that reproduces from seed and forms a new shoot each year from a taproot.

Diffuse and spotted knapweed are readily controlled with herbicides. Unless cultural techniques are used, however, the weeds will reinvade.

Diffuse knapweed (*Centaurea diffusa*) is a biennial or, occasionally, an annual or short-lived perennial. It reproduces and spreads from seed. The plant develops a single shoot (stem), 1 to 2 feet tall, that is branched toward the top. Rosette and lower shoot leaves are finely divided. Leaves become smaller toward the top of the shoot and have smooth margins.

Many solitary flowering heads occur on shoot tips. They are about 1/8 inch in diameter and 1/2 to 2/3 inch long. Flowers usually are white but may be purplish. Involucre bracts are divided like teeth on a comb and tipped with a slender spine that makes them sharp to the touch. Sometimes the bracts are dark-tipped or spotted like spotted knapweed. The long terminal spine differentiates diffuse from spotted knapweed.

Spotted knapweed (*Centaurea maculosa*) looks like diffuse knapweed with some notable exceptions. Spotted knapweed is a short-lived, noncreeping perennial that reproduces from seed (primary means of spread) and forms a new shoot each year from a taproot. The weed produces one or more shoots that are branched and 1 to 3 feet tall. Rosette leaves can be 6 inches long and deeply lobed. Leaves are similar to diffuse knapweed. Lavender to purple flowers are solitary on shoot tips and about the same size as diffuse knapweed flowers. Involucre bracts are stiff and black-tipped. The tip and upper bract margin have a soft, spine-like fringe and the center spine is shorter than others.

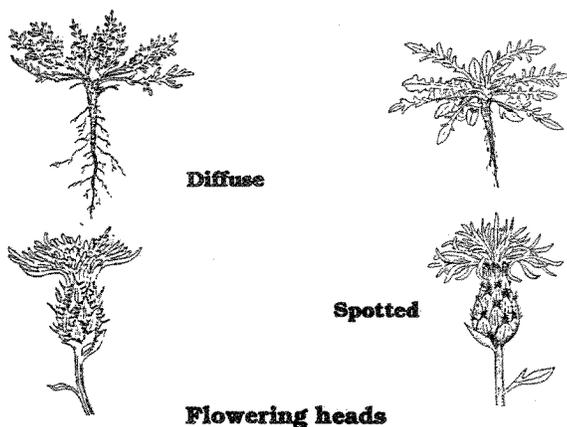
Phenology, Biology and Occurrence

Diffuse knapweed seeds germinate in spring or fall. Seedlings develop and survive the first growing season as a rosette. Rosettes resume growth early in their second spring, bolt in May to June, set seed in June and July, and die. Occasionally, diffuse knapweed germinates and sets seed in the same year, growing as an annual, or produces a new shoot the year after seed production, growing as a short-lived perennial.

Diffuse knapweed is native to degraded noncropland (waste places) and seashores from southern Europe to north-central Ukraine. It generally is found on dry, light, porous soils in Europe. Diffuse knapweed appears to occupy similar areas in the United States. Diffuse knapweed will not tolerate flooding or shade and thrives in the semiarid west (generally in 9- to 16-inch precipitation zones). Environmental disturbance (e.g., overgrazed pastures or rangeland, roadsides, rights-of-way, gravel piles, etc.) promotes its invasion.

In Colorado, the worst infestations occur along the Front Range in Larimer, Boulder, Douglas and El Paso counties. Severe infestations also occur in Archuleta and La Plata counties. A 1998 survey found 83,000 acres infested with diffuse knapweed and 3,900 infested with spotted knapweed.

Spotted knapweed germinates in spring or fall. Perennial plants resume growth in early spring and bolt at approximately the same time as diffuse knapweed. Flowering occurs through the summer into fall.



Spotted knapweed infestations are not as severe in Colorado as diffuse knapweed. However, this weed spreads rapidly. For example, spotted knapweed was first observed in Gallatin County, Montana, in the 1920s, but is now found in all Montana counties. Today, over 4.7 million acres are infested.

Spotted knapweed is native to central Europe, where it is found in light, porous, fertile, well-drained and often calcareous soils in warm areas. It occupies dry meadows, pastureland, stony hills, roadsides, and the sandy or gravelly floodplains of streams and rivers. Spotted knapweed tolerates dry conditions, similar to diffuse knapweed, but survives in higher moisture areas as well (e.g., it thrives in the wetter conditions of the western Montana mountains). Spotted and diffuse knapweed infestations often occur together in Colorado.

Management

Diffuse and spotted knapweed can be managed similarly. They are readily controlled with herbicides. However, the weeds will reinvade unless cultural tech-techniques are used.

Chemical control. Research conducted at Colorado State University indicates that dicamba (Vanquish/Clarity) at 0.5 to 1.0 lb ai/A (0.5 to 1.0 qt) and picloram (Tordon) 0.25 to 0.5 lb ai/A (0.5 to 1.0 qt) control diffuse knapweed. Tank-mixes of Vanquish/Clarity plus 2,4-D (0.5 + 1.0 lb ai/A), Vanquish/Clarity plus Tordon (0.5 to 1.0 + 0.125 to 0.25 lb ai/A), Tordon plus 2,4-D (0.188 + 1.0 lb ai/A), clopyralid plus 2,4-D (Curtail; 1.5 + 8.0 oz ai/A) all control diffuse knapweed. These tank-mixes may save money and reduce grass injury resulting from higher use rates of a single herbicide.

Spotted knapweed and diffuse knapweed generally occupy the same areas in Colorado, so the same herbicide treatments can be applied. Weed scientists at Montana State University indicate that 1 pt/A of Tordon (0.25 lb) controls spotted knapweed for two to three years, but the weed will reinvade the area unless other management techniques are used.

Cultural control. If desirable grass competition is evident in diffuse or spotted knapweed stands, judicious herbicide application that does not injure grasses may allow them to compete effectively with the weeds. Irrigation (where possible) may help stimulate grass competition in these cases. However, rangeland or pastures often are degraded, allowing knapweed encroachment, and herbicides alone will not restore the land to a productive state. Seeding suitable perennial grasses is necessary to prevent weed reinvansion.

Biological control. Many insects are being evaluated for biological control of diffuse and spotted knapweeds. Researchers at Montana State University believe it will take a complex of insects (perhaps 12) to reduce diffuse and spotted knapweed populations.

Several insects are available in Colorado, commercially or from the Colorado Department of Agriculture. The seedhead flies *Urophora affinis* and *U. quadrifasciata* have been released in many Front Range counties. These insects cause plants to produce fewer viable seeds and abort terminal or lateral flowers.

Root-feeding insects may have a more detrimental effect on knapweed populations than seed-feeding ones. Larvae of the diffuse knapweed root beetle (*Sphenoptera jugoslavica*) feed in the roots of diffuse knapweed. Larvae of the yellow-winged knapweed moth feed in the roots of both knapweed species.

Livestock (sheep, goats, cattle) will eat diffuse and spotted knapweed. Recent research completed by Colorado State shows that cattle grazing diffuse knapweed twice in spring decreased seed set by 50 percent and tumbling off-site over winter by 15 percent. Cattle were managed to achieve 50 percent utilization of pasture and were allowed to graze at two 10-day intervals when diffuse knapweed was bolting and about 6 to 12 inches tall.

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