



# Russian Thistle

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Russian thistle, *Salsola tragus*, is a non-native summer annual that is often known as tumbleweed. Two other species are common in New Mexico: barbwire Russian thistle (*S. paulsenii*) and spineless Russian thistle (*S. collinear*). The plant has a dense and bushy growth pattern, and when mature it forms large bushes with stiff branches and prickly leaves. Russian thistle may be toxic to livestock if ingested in large amounts, especially sheep. It can be a problem for homeowners with a garden because the plant can carry the virus that causes curly-top in tomatoes, melons, chili peppers, and other crops. In addition to Russian thistle and tumbleweed, it is also known as windwitch, witchweed, and common saltwort.



The rigid, erect stems typically grow to about 3 ft. tall and are green, sometimes with purple streaking. The stems are highly branched, and the plants are often very dense and bushy. The plant has

small, narrow leaves that are 0.3-2.0 in. long and 0.02-0.040 in. wide, green to blue-green in color with a fleshy texture, sometimes with short hairs. Each leaf has a sharp, stiff spine at the tip (most pronounced on upper leaves).



The small flowers grow singly at leaf axils and are 0.04-0.20 in. in diameter, pink, dark red, or brown in color, sometimes with a conspicuous midvein. Russian thistle produces a taproot and spreading horizontal roots and reproduces by seed only. After the plants produce seed and begin to die off, the main stems often break off and tumble in the wind, dispersing seed as they travel.



Management:

- Physical removal is effective for seedlings and young plants
- Cultivation before seed production is effective
- Herbicides are effective
- Prevention or reduction of disturbance is critical in preventing establishment

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