TUMBLEWEED

Top to bottom: Young tumbleweeds in mid-May; flowering tumbleweeds in August; dead tumbleweeds piled up underneath trees.

Scientific name: Salsola tragus
Other common name: Russian thistle

Identification

An annual, warm-season plant covered in stiff purple spines and stems. Prolific seed producer; often breaks off at ground surface once mature and tumbles around, inspiring its common name.

Life cycle

Tumbleweed typically germinates once per year in early summer. It often flowers in August or September, setting seed by October.

The issue

An invasive plant from Russia, tumbleweed is a common nuisance across the West and a formidable fire fuel and a fine fuel. A voluminous fuel when piled up against fences or under trees, it quickly feeds hot, intense fires. Tumbleweeds amplify fire risk and create the risk of quick spread.

Primary treatment

As an annual plant, it's important to manage tumbleweeds before they have set seed and ideally when they are still small. Ideal treatments do not disturb the soil and include pulling and herbicide. Large areas can be tilled or disked. If the tumbleweed is flowering, any manual removal works; mowing or string-trimming can be especially effective at reducing the seed bank.

Secondary treatment

If it is too late to address the seed cycle, steps can still be taken to reduce fire risk. Compact tumbleweeds as much as possible to decrease fuel volume and flame height. Consider disposing of tumbleweeds at a local landfill. Burning is another option during the open burn window.

TUMBLEWEED *Treatment*

1. Young plants: Pull, till, disk, or use herbicide

Why we recommend this These methods will kill young plants before they flower or set seed. *These treatments are the ones we recommend as plants are far easier to remove when small!*

Timing Early summer before plants have flowered or set seed.

Materials Tool such as grubber, hoe, disker, or tiller (optional). For herbicide, use an appropriate applicator, diluting agent, and PPE.

Instructions

a Manual removal: Using hands or a tool, remove plants.

b Herbicide: Apply according to chemical instructions.

Considerations

- Irrigating areas a day before pulling helps loosen soil.
- Hand-pulling is best done on small infestations.
- Note that tilling and disking prolong soil disturbance, which can extend weed infestations.
- Herbicide is best applied when plants are 6” tall to minimize chemical needed and the leftover biomass.

2. Flowering plants: Mow, string-trim, lop, or pull

Why we recommend this Mowing or trimming tumbleweed as it flowers greatly reduces seed formation. If done at the right time, it can kill the plants as well. Lopping plants at their base or pulling them is also an option.

Timing Late summer/early fall when plants are releasing pollen.

Materials Mower, lopper, or brush cutter, or a weed whacker with a brush-cutting blade. *When fire risk is high, avoid metal blades.*

Instructions

1 Mow, trim, or lop plants as low as possible (or pull!).

3. Seeded plants: Compact and/or burn

Why we recommend this These methods will reduce the fire risk of live or dead plants, though seeds will still germinate in the coming year. **Timing** These methods can be done at any time of year.

Option 1 Using something flat and/or heavy, like wooden boards or plastic bin lids, compress tumbleweeds. If possible, dispose at the landfill. *Big infestation?* Focus on the plants closest to structures or vegetation, or along walls and fences.

Option 2 Depending where you live, you may also be able to burn compressed tumbleweeds during the open burn window. Learn more at: grandcountyutah.net/1271/Open-Burning