

Tumbling Tumbleweeds



A young Russian thistle plant, photo by Mary Ellen (Mel) Harte, Bugwood.org

I recently drove past a scene that looked to be hard work. Three men were using pitchforks to clear their driveway of tumbleweeds that the wind had “tumbled” into place over winter. Two fences paralleled their driveway to the gate and tumbleweeds had buried both fences and most of the road. I did not stop to ask but my guess none of them were singing that old Western favorite “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” by the Sons of the Pioneers.

Tumbleweed is the “romantic” name for the very un-romantic Russian thistle, introduced from Russia and Siberia and now spread across much of the drier regions of North America. The plants have rounded shapes made of many branches and grow one to three feet high and up to five feet across. Small flowers produced from July to October develop into small, snail-shaped seeds. As the plants dry out, they become rigid and spiny. When completely dry, the wind breaks off the stems at ground level and the round shapes help them roll across the ground, an adaptation that spreads perhaps 250,000 seeds downwind of the original plant.

Elko roadsides and vacant lots are covered with Russian thistle. It would be nice to have a law in place that says if someone clears ground and leaves it bare they are responsible for treating the weeds that quickly cover that bare ground.

After my trip, I checked on my own, splendid crop in my back yard. If the fair had a horticultural category for Russian thistle, I could easily earn a ribbon. Maybe I should spray smaller plants with lacquer and sell them to old West aficionados via the Internet or build tumbleweed “snow men” as I have seen in snowless Southwest yards. Then again, maybe not.

This early in spring, I found many tumbleweed seedlings. The University of Nevada Cooperative Extension provides a good article on Russian thistle, which describes the seedlings as looking like small pine trees. Their long, thin leaves carry a reddish tinge. Later plants have red or purple stripes on their stems.

Cattle and sheep will eat the young, succulent plants but not after they mature. The typical way to remove these invasive weeds is by spraying young plants with a broadleaf-selective herbicide. So it is time to prime my weed sprayer and maybe this fall, my back yard will not resemble a Western movie set complete with tumbling tumbleweeds.

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