

The Weekly Plant

12 May 2013

Common names: Malta (Maltese) starthistle (star thistle), Napa starthistle, tocalote
Scientific name: *Centaurea melitensis*¹

TAV location:

There are two flowering paloverde between the tennis court and Javelina Way. The starthistles are at the base of each of those trees. There are also a number of smaller plants in the drainage that is between the tennis court and Javelina Way.

Discussion:

Sorry, it's another invasive plant this week. With your help, we can keep it under control.

Malta starthistle is a winter annual native to the Mediterranean region. Experts believe it entered California in the 1700s, probably as a contaminant in wheat, barley, and oat seed brought from Europe, then distributed to farmers. Malta starthistle grows well in disturbed areas, agricultural fields, and roadsides. The spines of the seedheads cling to clothing, skin, and fur, helping distribute the seeds. It has also been found as a contaminant in weedy hay. As with almost every invasive species, humans are the culprits. We brought it to the US from Europe. We distribute it via hay or contaminated clothing and equipment. Without us, spread of most invasives is limited and slow. Because of us, invasive species go just about anywhere.

Though Malta starthistle is not yet a noxious weed in Arizona², it is considered a threat. It can displace native vegetation, creating a pure stand of starthistle. It is encroaching on the habitat of Arizona cliffrose (*Purshia subintegra*), an Arizona endangered species found in central Arizona. It worsens soil erosion, since its roots do not hold the soil.³

Malta starthistle is very easy to recognize when it flowers. Until then, it is easily confused with yellow starthistle (*Centaurea solstitialis*). This is not really a problem. Yellow starthistle is a worse invasive plant than Malta starthistle. If you accidentally dig out one mistaking it for the other, you'll only get congratulations.

Malta starthistle germinates with the fall/winter rains, forming a rosette of leaves that looks something like a dandelion. In spring, the flower stalks begin to elongate, branching and growing to 3 feet if ample water is available. The leaves on these stems have no lobes but are long and slender. Their bases extend down the stem, giving the appearance of green wings. In spring and early summer flowering begins. The flower heads are covered with spines and yellow flowers emerge from the top. Malta starthistle has short spines, about 1/4". They are tinged with brown or purple and have small side spines. Yellow starthistle flowers have spines that are yellow and much longer - up to an inch in length.

The easiest way for the Village to control Malta starthistle is to pull it up and discard it in the trash (don't leave on the ground - they are already producing seeds). Over the next few days, that's what I'll be doing. I'll leave the plants under the trees for you to see, then pull them in a week. YOU can help by just letting me know if you see this plant anywhere in the Village. I'll be glad to eliminate it for you.



Left: Flower head, note small spines on large spines. Above: seeds on flower head



Above: lobed basal leaves.



Right: slender leaves that create "wings" on the stems.

¹ Tropicos (<http://www.tropicos.org/>) is the source of the currently accepted scientific name.

² "Noxious weed" is legal concept. Laws regulate the control of these weeds, often requiring their destruction. Malta starthistle is a noxious weed in Nevada and New Mexico. Yellow starthistle is a noxious weed in Arizona.

³ See http://www.voaz.org/html/projects_events/invasives_central_az/Malta_Starthistle_Facts.pdf

