

Getting Even with Tumbleweeds (aka Russian thistle)

The time to get control over tumbleweeds is **in the spring**, when they first sprout

by Sally Manning

Following a wind storm in Texas a couple of months ago, a man found his house literally covered in tumbleweeds. Although the tumbleweeds blew in from the nearby fields, the county concluded that removal of the weeds was the homeowner's responsibility.



Fences may stop most tumbleweeds from rolling from LADWP land onto the Reservation. But, on the Reservation itself, many of us need to be diligent about pulling and removing tumbleweeds *BEFORE* they become a menace.

Why should we get control over tumbleweeds? There are several reasons, including: (1) mature, dry tumbleweeds readily burn, thus can carry wildfire; (2) tumbleweed (*Salsola tragus*) is not native to the United States, and it competes with more desirable plants for water, space, and nutrients; (3) in summer, they produce pollen to which many people are allergic; (4) mature plants are an eyesore, and can be hazardous to motorists; (5) the mature plants are stiff and spiny, and to those most allergic, handling them can cause a rash or other discomfort.

Tumbleweed seeds begin sprouting in late April -- or after -- which is late compared with many annual (short-lived) plant species. You'll most likely see the seedlings along the edges of lawns, driveways, or sidewalks (but they can be more places!).

After sprouting, the seedlings look harmless; in fact, they are almost cute. They have a red or maroon stem and start with two bright green fleshy leaves, which are opposite each other. Two smaller fleshy green leaves soon appear at the apex, and they are oriented 90 degrees from the first leaves. Each hot-dog-shaped leaf has an almost inconspicuous spine at its tip. **THIS IS THE TIME TO PULL THE SEEDLING!** The delicate spine at the tip of each fleshy leaf is how you know it's a tumbleweed seedling. At this stage, the spine will not hurt.

As the seedling grows, more fleshy leaves with fine spine tips are added, and the little plant may start to branch when young. As the little plant gets older and larger, it retains its reddish stems, but the leaves take on a more bluish-green tinge. They get more and more prickly as they mature too. If they are removed before July, when they start to set seed, not only will you get rid of the tumbleweed itself but also all of its potential (seed) descendants.



If you remove all the seedling tumbleweeds in your yard, you will effectively begin to reduce the "seed bank," the tumbleweed seeds that are hiding, so to speak, in your soil. However, it could take 3 years of this diligent effort, pulling each as it sprouts, to completely deplete the tumbleweed seed bank. Seeds are thought to remain viable for three years from the time they are produced.

Quickly removing any mature tumbleweeds if they blow into your yard helps, because once they are rolling around, they are dropping seeds all along the way. Handle them only by their dead stem/root. They resist being crushed, and if you do crush them on the ground, remember: they are happy to drop their seeds right there!

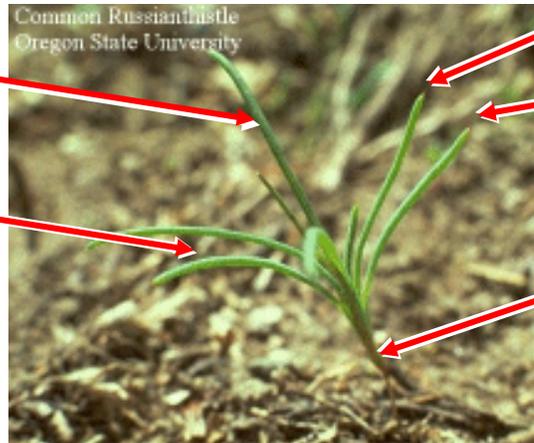
PULL WEEDS NOW, WHEN THEY'RE SMALL!!

Over the coming week or so, spend a few minutes outdoors pulling them out. The whole family can participate! Later: You'll have very few, or even *none* if you've done a very good job!

How to Identify a Tumbleweed Seedling:

Fleshy, succulent leaves.

Pairs of leaves occur
opposite each other along
stem



Very fine "spine" at leaf tip.

Stem appears reddish

Look for seedlings along the edges of lawns, driveways, or sidewalks, or underneath dead tumbleweeds. Remove dead tumbleweeds by rolling them until you find the stem, grasp the stem and pick up carefully; otherwise the spines will attack.