

Spotted Knapweed

Centaurea biebersteinii DC. (or *C. maculosa* auct. non Lam.)

- **biennial or short-lived perennial, herbaceous plant:** 8" - 32" (or more) tall
- **numerous, showy, pink-purple** (occasionally white) **flowers** grow at the ends of stems
- plant is open in appearance because of **highly dissected leaves** and squarish, **slender, stems**
- **no sharp spines** on leaves or in the rows of dark-tipped phyllaries found below the flowers
- thick taproot lacks the remains of old leaf bases at the ground's surface

In its **first year**, Spotted Knapweed produces only a **basal rosette** (circular spoke-like pattern of leaves on the ground). These leaves may be 6" long and not very lobed. In the **second year**, the **plant shoots up 1-20** rough stems that **branch repeatedly** in their upper halves. The **alternately arranged stem leaves** are 1"-4" long and **highly dissected into narrow, linear lobes**. Leaves close to the flowers may be less dissected or even unlobed. The end of each stem branch has a flower head that opens mid-late summer. The basal rosette may stay green after the flowering stalks turn brown. The dead stalks may persist over winter.

The showy "flowers" of Spotted Knapweed are really **flowerheads**. In the Knapweeds (genus *Centaurea*), the each flowerhead is composed of many tiny, tubular flowers that have long, thin lobes. The flowers at the edge of the flowerhead are larger than those in the center and have longer and more deeply-cut lobes making the flowerhead appear to have strap-like ray flowers.

Below the flowers in the flowerhead are several rows of tiny, highly modified leaves called "**phyllaries**" (or "**bracts**"). In Spotted Knapweed, the outer phyllaries are strongly, vertically ribbed and have **dark, fringed tips** (best seen with a handlens). The side edges of the phyllaries have a white fringe (use handlens). From a distance, the dark phyllary tips create a spotted pattern below the flowers. Taken as a unit, the rows of phyllaries supporting the flowers are about 1/2" in height while the showy flowerheads may be 5/8" to 1" across. Spotted Knapweed is an aggressive weed on dry sites, likely to be first noticed on roadsides.



Text and photos by: Charlotte Pyle, October 2002