COMMON COCKLEBUR
(Xanthium pensylvanicum)

SEEDLING DESCRIPTION
In common cocklebur, the stem below the seed leaves is stout, purple at the base, and green on the upper portion. The seed leaves are about 1½ inches (4 cm) long and ¼ inch (6 mm) wide. They are thick and tapered to a dull point. Upper surfaces of the leaves are darker than lower surfaces. Midveins are visible on the upper surfaces as light-green lines and on the lower surfaces as ridges. Lateral veins are visible on the lower surfaces as parallel, light-green lines. Leaf stalks (petioles) are short and broad.

The first two true leaves are opposite each other, egg shaped, and slightly toothed; subsequent leaves alternate up the stem and are distinctly toothed. Newly emerging leaves are erect and flat, and both surfaces have a dense covering of hair. The upper surfaces of true leaves are darker than the lower surfaces. Veins are evident on both leaf surfaces. The stem is stout, green with maroon flecks, and roughened with a dense covering of stiff, short hairs.

BIOLOGY
Common cocklebur is a highly branched, taprooted, broadleaved annual that grows from 8 inches to 6 feet (0.2 to 2 m) high. The dull green leaves alternate along the stem, are coarsely toothed, and often have three to five shallow lobes. The leaf stalks are about as long as the leaves.

The flower heads of common cocklebur are unisexual. Small male and female flowers form separate clusters. Male (staminate) flowers are in short terminal spikes or clusters, and the burlike female (pistillate) flowers are in axillary clusters. The distinct seed pods, or burs of cocklebur make the weed easy to identify. Burs are light brown, ½ to 1 inch (1 to 2.5 cm) long, and oval or oblong. They are covered with:

1. An annual, cocklebur emerges only from seed.
2. Plants are most easily controlled when small.
3. Leaves have 3 midveins. Female flowers grow in leaf axils.
5. The hard dried burs are easily dislodged.
Xanthium is the botanical name for cocklebur. One theory suggests the name was chosen by an eighteenth century French botanist, in honor of Xanthus, the ancient capital of Lycia. The modern explanation is that Xanthium derives from the Greek word, Xanthos, meaning “yellow,” since cockleburs have a thick yellow sap. Cocklebur sap was used in Greece for centuries as a hair dye. The leaves, seeds, and roots of some cocklebur species were once used as medicine to purify blood and to counteract hydrophobia (fear of water).

CONTROL
Complete control of common cocklebur is often difficult because some of the seeds remain dormant in the soil for months or even years. Early-season control is important because cocklebur grows rapidly and, once established, can be a long-term problem.

The most effective control measure is to prevent seed production. Cultivation practices and herbicide applications can also be effective. No single herbicide gives good full-season control; therefore, both preemergence and postemergence herbicide applications are necessary.

For most effective postemergence control, cocklebur must be shorter than 8 inches (20 cm) at time of treatment, and herbicides must be applied under good growing conditions.

For specific recommendations, consult your county extension agent or the most recent Weed Control Manual and Herbicide Guide, available through Meister Publishing Company, 37841 Euclid Avenue, Willoughby, Ohio 44094. Follow label instructions for all herbicides and observe restrictions on grazing and harvesting procedures.


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