

Using a Multi-pronged Strategy for Wheel Cactus control in Central Victoria

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Summary Wheel Cactus (*Opuntia robusta*) has invaded thousands of hectares of natural environment and private properties in Central Victoria. Despite prolonged and relentless community action involving volunteers, landowners and managers, all investing much labour and cash, this noxious weed continues to invade our landscapes. Wheel Cactus is highly invasive, reproduces by both seed and vegetatively, is drought tolerant and has a lack of predators. Combined, these factors make it extremely difficult to control.

One key focus of our group, the Tarrangower Cactus Control Group (TCCG), is to prevent Wheel Cactus reinfesting the Maldon Historic Reserve. We've been using direct injection of herbicide and manual digging techniques for the past 15 years, but still struggling to contain the core infestations on private properties adjacent to the reserve. We've introduced an additional tool, the biological control insect 'Cochineal' (*Dactylopius opuntiae*) hoping that a more integrated strategy will help control this weed. With funding from Landcare Victoria Inc.,

TCCG completed a project in 2019 where we introduced the biocontrol agent to our local community and land managers. TCCG volunteers have set up a Cochineal nursery and established Cochineal insect populations at six properties located within the core Wheel Cactus infestations. We also designed an individualized, integrated management plan with each of these landowners. We hope this multi-pronged approach will result in less expensive, less labour intense and less chemically focused management of Wheel Cactus, which will also present less risks to humans and our natural environment. A management strategy incorporating a biological control agent should also prove to be a more sustainable and long-term strategy. We'll review the reproduction and spread of the Cochineal insects and the impact of the integrated management plans on these properties, and the impact on the reproduction and spread of Wheel Cactus in Central Victoria.

Keywords Wheel Cactus, Biological Control, Cochineal, Integrated management