

# Harrisia cactus

*Harrisia martinii*, *Harrisia tortuosa* and *Harrisia pomanensis*



Harrisia cactus can form dense infestations that will reduce pastures to a level unsuitable for stock. Harrisia cactus will choke out other pasture species when left unchecked.

The spines are a problem for stock management, interfering with mustering and stock movement.

Harrisia cactus produces large quantities of seed that is highly viable and easily spread by birds and other animals. As well as reproducing from seed, harrisia cactus has long trailing branches that bend and take root wherever they touch the ground. Any broken-off portions of the plant will take root and grow.

## Legal requirements

Harrisia cactus (*Harrisia martinii*, *Harrisia tortuosa* and *Harrisia pomanensis*) are category 3 restricted invasive plants under the *Biosecurity Act 2014*. It must not be given away, sold, or released into the environment. The Act requires everyone to take all reasonable and practical steps to minimise the risks associated with invasive plants under their control. This is called a general biosecurity obligation (GBO).



Queensland  
Government

At a local level, each local government must have a biosecurity plan that covers invasive plants in its area. This plan may include actions to be taken on harrisia cactus. Some of these actions may be required under local laws. Contact your local government for more information.

## Description

Harrisia cactus is a perennial. The spiny fleshy stems are jointed and form tangled mats about half a metre high. Many branches often lie flat and take root where they touch the ground. Each section is ribbed lengthwise with six ribs; each rib has low, thick, triangular humps at regular intervals. These humps have cushions of grey felty hairs, three to five short spines lying flat, and one to three erect, stiff, very sharp spines 2.5–3 cm long.

The large flowers open at night. Flowers are pink and funnel-shaped with a tinge of white. These grow singly near the ends of the stems on a scaly but spineless slender grey-green tube 12–15 cm long.

Round, red fruits 4–5 cm across have scattered bumps with hairs and spines. Numerous small black seeds are embedded in the white, juicy pulp of the fruit, which splits open when ripe.

Harrisia cactus roots are of two types. Shallow feeding roots up to 3 cm thick and 30 cm to 2 m long grow mostly horizontally off a crown, up to 15 cm below ground level. Swollen tuberous storage roots descend to a depth of 15–60 cm.

## Life cycle

Harrisia cactus bears a bright red fruit containing 400–1000 small black seeds. Plants are easily established from seed and germinate soon after rain.

Seedlings quickly produce a swollen tuberous food storage root that develops as the plant grows. Branches take root where they touch the ground and new plants will grow from broken branches and sections of underground tubers.

Counts of tubers in dense cactus infestations have shown over 125 000 per hectare. Each plant houses many dormant underground buds that are all capable of reshooting when the tip growth dies; any small portion of the tuberous root left in the soil will grow.

## Methods of spread

Fruit and seed are readily eaten by birds, mammals and to a lesser extent by feral pigs.

## Habitat and distribution

Harrisia cactus is a native of Argentina and Paraguay, South America. It was introduced to Australia as a pot plant in the 1890s. In 1935 it was first recognised as a serious pest in the Collinsville district and by the 1950s was rapidly spreading south.

Harrisia cactus is mainly a pest of brigalow and associated softwood country. However, infestations are now appearing in box and ironbark stands and also in pine forests.

The cactus is shade tolerant and reaches its maximum development in the shade and shelter of brigalow scrub, though established infestations can persist once scrub is pulled.

Harrisia cactus is found in the Collinsville, Nebo, Moranbah, Dingo, Blackwater and Goondiwindi districts, with minor infestations occurring at Millmerran, Greenmount, Gatton, Ipswich, Rockhampton, Rannes, Mount Morgan, Alpha and Mitchell.

## Control

### Managing harrisia cactus

The GBO requires a person to take reasonable and practical steps to minimise the risks posed by harrisia cactus. This fact sheet provides information and some options for controlling harrisia cactus.

Control of this plant is difficult as it has a deep underground tuberous root system and use of a combination of physical, biologic and herbicide controls is recommended.

### Physical control

Dig out plants completely and burn. Ensure that all tubers that can grow are removed and destroyed.

Ploughing is not considered an effective means of control unless followed by annual cropping.

### Biological control

Two introduced insects have become established in the field:

- a stem-boring longicorn beetle (*Alcidion cereicola*)
- a mealy bug (*Hypogeococcus festerianus*).

The stem-boring beetle only attacks older woody stems. In the Collinsville area, large beetle colonies developed and contributed to the collapse of dense areas of cactus. Populations of *Alcidion cereicola* have declined with the reduction in the cactus in recent years.

The most successful biological control agent is the mealy bug *Hypogeococcus festerianus* which is now present in harrisia cactus in Collinsville, Dingo, Moranbah, Blackwater, Nebo, Charters Towers and Goondiwindi districts, with small colonies established at Alpha, Capella, Rannes, Gatton, Greenmount, Millmerran and Rockhampton.

### How mealy bug works

The mealy bug aggregates and feeds in the tips of stems and buds, where it limits growth and causes distortion. This results in the knotting of the stem. The plant's response is to utilise energy reserves within the tuber system to produce new growth. Eventually the plant dies, as it is unable to support the continuous high energy demands.

Dry weather reduces the effectiveness of the mealy bug. When dry, the plant's tuber system becomes dormant. Consequently, mealy bug damage does not result in new growth and the energy reserves within the plant are not affected. Instead the bug may damage all vegetative parts and eventually die out. The tuber will remain dormant until adequate moisture returns, when it will reshoot.

## How to spread the bug

Mealy bug disperses naturally via wind, although landholder assistance is necessary for its continuous spread, particularly between patches. The bug is manually spread by cutting infected stems and placing them into healthy plants. The best pieces for starting new colonies are large knobs of twisted and distorted cactus that contain many mealy bugs well protected inside knots. Stem tips covered by white, woolly masses of bug are also good. To collect the bug, cut infected stems approximately 15 cm from the distorted knob and place segments in green, plump sections of the healthy plant. Avoid placing mealy bug in stressed or dried out stems. Small cactus plants require at least one large knot, with larger plants requiring three knots per plant. Where possible, landholders should infest every cactus clump as this ensures a rapid reduction in growth and fruiting potential. When cactus infestations are light, chemical control may be a preferable option.

Cut pieces can be transported in boxes or open vehicles. They are not delicate, but are best kept in the shade. Avoid keeping them in large heaps, in direct sunlight, under tarpaulins or in closed containers for long periods. Such conditions will promote rotting of the stems, leading to poor results or failures. Ideally, stems should be put out within three days and a maximum of five days.

## When to infest

Best results come by infesting new areas during spring and early summer, from September to December. Maximum growth and spreading occurs in the summer months of December to February. During the drier and colder months of April to August the mealy bug does not die, but little growth and multiplication occurs. Introduction of mealy bug during autumn and winter will not be lost, but little effect is seen until the following summer.



## How soon to expect results

Mealy bugs are generally more active and effective on harrisia cactus growing underneath shrubs and trees, so results will be seen more quickly in these areas than in cactus growing in the open. Best results are obtained when infesting plants that have actively growing new shoots.

During wet summers in northern and central Queensland, the growing points of stems will begin to curl after about six weeks.

By the end of the first summer, damage (severe twisting) will be widespread in infested plants. If the initial infestation was sufficiently heavy, no fruit or growth will occur during the second year, and the cactus will begin to die during the third year. Seedlings and regrowth shoots will continue to be present but by the end of the fourth year there should be very little cactus left.

In the southern portion of the state, where temperatures are lower, the mealy bug still provides control but the process takes longer. However, the mealy bug will do better on cactus in the open, rather than in the shade, as temperatures are higher in the open.

## Herbicide control

Foliar application of registered herbicides provides effective control, but can be costly over large areas.

Before using any herbicide always read the label carefully. All herbicides must be applied strictly in accordance with the directions on the label (see to Table 1).

## More information

For more information contact your local government or visit [biosecurity.qld.gov.au](http://biosecurity.qld.gov.au).



**Table 1. Herbicides for the control of harrisia cactus**

Situation	Herbicide	Rate	Comments
Native pastures, rights-of-way, commercial and industrial areas	Metsulfuron-methyl 600 g/kg (e.g. Brush-Off®)	20 g/100 L water + surfactant	Foliar spray Spray plant when actively growing to run-off point A follow-up treatment may be necessary
Pastures, non-crop areas, commercial and industrial areas, domestic and public service areas and rights-of-way	Aminopyralid 8 g/L + picloram 100 g/L + triclopyr 300 g/L (e.g. Grazon Extra)	500 mL/100 L of water	Foliar spray APVMA permit PER90719 expires 31/02/2024
Non-crop land and rights-of-way	Dichlorprop 600 g/L	1 L/60 L water	Foliar spray Good soil moisture essential Spray plant when actively growing to run-off point A follow-up treatment may be necessary
Agricultural non-crop areas, commercial and industrial areas, fence lines, forestry, pastures and rights-of-way	Triclopyr 240 g/L + Picloram 120 g/L (e.g. Access®)	1 L/60 L diesel	Foliar spray Spray plant when actively growing Apply as overall spray, wetting all areas of the plant to ground level
Non-agricultural areas (native pastures), commercial and industrial areas and rights-of-ways	Aminopyralid 375 g/kg + Metsulfuron methyl 3 g/kg (e.g. Stinger)	40 g/100 L water	Foliar spray Spray to thoroughly wet using 1000 to 1400 L/ha Follow-up treatment may be necessary
Commercial and industrial areas, around buildings and rights-of-way	Triclopyr 75 g/L + Metsulfuron-methyl 28 g/L (e.g. Brush Weed®)	500 mL/100 L	Foliar spray Spray to thoroughly wet using 1000 to 1500 L/ha Follow-up treatment may be necessary
Agricultural non-crop areas, commercial and industrial areas, forests, pastures and rights-of-way	Triclopyr 200 g/L + Picloram 100 g/L (e.g. Slasher) or Triclopyr 200 g/L + Picloram 100 g/L + Aminopyralid 25 g/L (e.g. Tordon RegrowthMaster)	2.5 L/100 L water	Foliar spray Spray plant when actively growing (September–March) Treat all stems thoroughly
	600 g/L triclopyr products (e.g. Garlon)	3 L / 100 L water or 1.33 L/100 L diesel distillate	Foliar spray APVMA permit PER92465 expires 30/11/2024

**Note: Refer to the permits for more herbicide options. Read the label carefully before use. Always use the herbicide in accordance with the directions on the label.**

