

Key Characteristics for Differentiating Thistles

Latin Name	Common Name	Origin	Flower Color	Leaves	Stems	Average Height	Growth Form
Purple flowers							
<i>Carduus nutans</i>	Musk thistle	Nonnative, noxious	Purple; single very large nodding flower at end of stem; purple bracts	Deeply lobed, dark green with light green midrib; spiny margins	Spiny winged	1 – 6 feet	Biennial
<i>Onopordum acanthium</i>	Scotch thistle	Nonnative, noxious	Purple; large upright flowerheads; bracts are spine-tipped	Toothed with slight lobe; attach directly to stem; hairy, giving grayish appearance to plant	Spiny winged, hairy	To 10 feet	Biennial
<i>Cirsium arvense</i>	Canada thistle	Nonnative, noxious	Light purple to white; multiple small flower heads in clusters on each stem	Whitish underside; spiny-tipped irregular lobes; attach directly to stem	Smooth with no spines; ridged	1.5 – 4 feet	Perennial (from crown and rhizomes)
<i>Cirsium vulgare</i>	Bull thistle	Nonnative, not on noxious weed list	Pink to purple; occur in clusters at ends of branches	Tops of leaves are hairy and prickly (unidirectional); underside is cottony with prominently raised main veins	Spiny winged	1 – 6 feet	Biennial
Red flowers							
<i>Cirsium andersonii</i>	Anderson's thistle	Native, not on noxious weed list	Rose red to reddish purple; single upright flower at end of stem	Divided and wavy with spiny margin	Purplish	2 – 4 feet	Perennial
<i>Cirsium pastoris</i>	Snowy thistle	Native, not on noxious weed list	Red, rarely white or pink; single flower on each branched upper stem	Hairy and white; spine on tip	No wings	1 – 5 feet	Biennial
White to pale yellow/lavender flowers							
<i>Cirsium douglasii</i>	Douglas or swamp thistle	Native, not on noxious weed list	Dark purple to cream or white; multiple flowers on ends of stems	Bright midrib	Hollow; highly branched	3 – 8 feet	Biennial
<i>Cirsium scariosum</i>	Elk or Drummond's thistle	Native, not on noxious weed list	White to pale lavender; flowers extend directly from rosette	Lobed; not spiny	Stems generally absent; forms a flat rosette	Up to 3 feet; generally less than 1 foot	Biennial to perennial
Yellow flowers							
<i>Sonchus arvensis</i>	Perennial sow-thistle	Nonnative, noxious	Bright yellow flowers occur at end of branched stems; hairs on bracts and flower stalks	Clasping base; prickly margins more or less toothed; coarsely pinnate-lobed	Erect, smooth, leafy	1.5 – 5 feet	Perennial