



Identification and Management of

Thistles

in Colorado

Larimer County Department of Natural Resources

3rd Edition

Acknowledgements

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Actual Scale



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Introduction

Native thistles are dispersed broadly across many ecosystems in Colorado. Thistles in Colorado belong to the genera *Cirsium*, *Carduus* and *Onopordum*. Individual species occupy niches from 3,500 feet in elevation to above timberline. These plants are valuable to pollinators, seed feeders, browsing wildlife and to the beauty and diversity of native plant communities.

Some non-native thistle species, however, have become an invasive threat to agriculture and natural areas and are considered noxious weeds in Colorado.



*A mountain goat nibbles on a mountain thistle (*Cirsium scopulorum*). Mountain goats are not native to Colorado, but they do forage on native thistles.*

About This Guide

In an effort to manage invasive plants, native and non-native thistles alike are often pulled, mowed, clipped or sprayed indiscriminately. This guide will help you to identify and distinguish among the 15 native and five non-native thistle species found in Colorado, whether you're a private landowner, park or open space visitor, plant enthusiast, public land manager, or seasonal employee. This guide will give you the tools you need to avoid inadvertently pulling or spraying native species, while fostering an appreciation for the beauty and diversity of Colorado's native thistles.

Each species of thistle is presented with the following:

- Common and scientific names
- Geographic location in Colorado and preferred habitat
- Photos of a flower and identification descriptions for an adult plant

The guide continues with tips for managing noxious thistles, including biennial and perennial species. A look-alike section of plants that are commonly mistaken for thistles follows. The guide concludes with a glossary of terms, a list of sources, and information about Larimer County Weed District services.



Mountain thistle (Cirsium scopulorum) grows in the tundra and scree above 10,500 feet in Rocky Mountain National Park.

A Few Notes About This Guide

- Scientific names follow Jennifer Ackerfield's *Flora of Colorado*, published in 2015.
- Identification tips come from the sources listed on page 31 of this guide, as well as the years of management experience from Larimer County Weed District staff.
- Variations in the appearance of thistle species in the field occur with differing soil type, moisture availability, location, and other factors.
- See the glossary on pages 29-30 for definitions of certain technical, botanical terms used to describe identifying features of plants.
- For detailed information on managing invasive thistles in your area, including herbicide options, contact your local weed agency or the Colorado State University Extension office.

Barneby's Thistle

(*Cirsium barnebyi*)

Barneby's thistle is a perennial with a taproot found in northwestern Colorado, primarily Garfield and Rio Blanco counties. It grows only on shale slopes in pinyon-juniper woodlands from 5,900 to 8,000 feet in elevation.

Identification

- Leaves appear white and are tomentose (woolly-cottony) on both sides of the leaf.
- Leaves are lobed.
- Flowering heads are small, with phyllary spines about 3 mm long.
- Flowers are blue or red-to-purple, appearing June through August.



Cainville Thistle

(*Cirsium arizonicum* var. *bipinnatum*)

Cainville thistle is an uncommon biennial or perennial found in western Colorado. It grows in sandy soil in foothills, pinyon-juniper woodlands, and rocky flats from 5,000 to 8,400 feet in elevation.

Identification

- Leaves appear grayish and are tomentose (woolly-cottony) on the underside of the leaf.
- Flowering heads stick out beyond the upper leaves, appearing pineapple-like before blooming, with phyllary spines 7-8 mm long.
- Corolla lobes are at least twice as long as the tube.
- Flowers are red-to-purple, appearing June through September.
- Seed head resembles the seed head of noxious Canada thistle.



Eaton's Thistle

(Cirsium eatonii)

Eaton's thistle is a biennial or perennial found in mountainous areas of Colorado, prevalent along the Continental Divide. It grows on rocky, open slopes, roadside banks, and in meadows from 9,500 to 13,000 feet in elevation.

Identification

- Stems taper toward the top of the plant and are soft, not spiny or winged.
- Leaves are narrow and densely spiny with numerous closely spaced lobes.
- Flowering heads are clustered, subtended by whorled leaves extending past the cluster, with phyllaries that have spiny margins and a stout, terminal spine.
- Phyllary margins have interconnecting hairs (like two combs side by side).
- Flowers are rose-to-purple or white, appearing July through September.



Elk or Meadow Thistle

(*Cirsium scariosum*)

Elk, or meadow, thistle is a biennial or short-lived perennial found in mountainous areas of Colorado. It grows in forest clearings, wet meadows, and along streams and roadsides from 7,000 to 12,500 feet in elevation.

Identification

- Elk thistle has two growth habits: a short plant with a massive rosette of lobed, spiny basal leaves with a cluster of stemless flowering heads, or a taller plant with stemless flowering heads in the area between the stem and the leaf. It's the only thistle that can lack a stem.
- If present, stems are soft, lacking spines.
- Flowering heads are clustered, subtended by leaves extending past the cluster, with phyllaries that are smooth and glossy. The back is covered with minute yellowish glands.
- Flowers are white, appearing June through September.



Fish Lake Thistle

Cirsium clavatum

Fish Lake thistle is a perennial found in the foothills and mountainous areas of Colorado. It grows in meadows, forests, open areas, and along roadsides from 6,800 to 10,800 feet in elevation, up to the Continental Divide.

Identification

- Stems are reddish.
- Leaves are roughly fringed.
- Flowering heads have inner phyllaries with fringed tips, with phyllaries lacking a terminal spine.
- Phyllary margins are often fringed.
- Flowers are white-to-brown in color, appearing June through September.



Flodman's Thistle

(*Cirsium flodmanii*)

Flodman's thistle is a perennial found mostly in areas along the Front Range and southern Colorado. It grows in moist meadows, pastures, and disturbed sites from 4,800 to 8,500 feet in elevation. Flodman's thistle reproduces by rhizomes (underground stems).

Identification

- Upper stems are often branching.
- Leaves appear grayish, are tomentose (woolly-cottony) on the underside of the leaf (resembling Scotch thistle), and are highly lobed with wavy margins.
- Flowering heads are solitary.
- Flowers are deep purple, appearing July through September.
- Flodman's thistle appears similar to noxious Canada thistle. It is distinguished from Canada thistle by its phyllary spines that bend away from the flowering head, its whitish stems, and its leaf undersides.



Mountain Thistle

(Cirsium scopulorum)

Mountain thistle is a common biennial found in mountainous areas of Colorado. It grows in tundra, boulder fields, and scree from 10,500 to 13,500 feet in elevation along the Continental Divide.

Identification

- Stems are very woolly, not spiny, and covered with overlapping leaves.
- Basal leaves are long and very spiny.
- Flowering heads are massive, densely woolly and congested in often nodding or slouching terminal clusters, subtended by leaves extending past the cluster.
- Flowers are often yellow or white, but can also be pink, appearing July through September.



New Mexico Thistle

(*Cirsium neomexicanum*)

New Mexico thistle is a biennial or short-lived perennial found in southwest Colorado. It often grows in clay or shale soil along roadsides, on canyon sides, and on dry, open slopes from 4,500 to 7,000 feet in elevation.

Identification

- Stems lack spines or wings.
- Leaves have a grayish cast and lack long, stout spines.
- Phyllaries have loose tufts of soft, cottony hairs, with lower bracts bent abruptly downward at the midpoint.
- Flowers are white-to-pink, appearing May through July.
- New Mexico thistle appears similar to bull, Scotch, and plumeless thistles. It is distinguished from these noxious thistles by its stems, leaves, and flower color.



Ousterhout's Thistle

(Cirsium osterhoutii)

Ousterhout's thistle is a perennial found in the central mountains of Colorado, including Eagle, Grand, Gunnison, Lake, Park, Pitkin and Summit counties. It grows in mixed-conifer forests and meadows from 9,500 to 13,000 feet in elevation, commonly found next to Eaton's thistle.

Identification

- Stems are purple and hairy.
- Leaves are woolly underneath and thinner, flatter, and less spiny than other thistles, with broad lobes and a whitish mid-stripe.
- Phyllaries have purple centers, margins fringed with woolly hairs, spines that are straight and tan, and tips that are not flanged.
- Flowers are cream in color, appearing June through September.



Ownbey's Thistle

(*Cirsium ownbeyi*)

Ownbey's thistle, thought to be Colorado's rarest thistle, is a perennial found only in Moffat County, Colorado. It grows in open areas of rocky, sandy, or clay soils from 5,500 to 6,200 feet in elevation.

Identification

- Leaves are hairless, green on both sides, very spiny, and strongly decurrent, extending down the stem below the point of attachment, with smooth, finely divided lobes.
- Flowering heads are hidden in a mass of spines.
- Flowers are white-to-rose pink, appearing June through August.



Parry's Thistle

(*Cirsium parryi*)

Parry's thistle is a biennial or perennial found in southcentral Colorado, including Archuleta, Costilla, Conejos, Dolores, Hindsdale, Huerfano, Las Animas, Mineral, Ouray, Saguache, San Juan, and San Miguel counties. It grows in open montane forests, subalpine forests, and alpine meadows from 8,500 to 13,500 feet in elevation.

Identification

- Leaves are clasping, shallowly lobed, and are hairless above and cobwebby below the leaf.
- Flowering heads are often in a branched cluster.
- Outer phyllaries are spiny and margined with long, cobwebby hairs, with terminal spines that are straight (not reflexed or bent away from the flowering head).
- Flowers are greenish-yellow, appearing June through August.



Platte or Prairie Thistle

(*Cirsium canescens*)

Platte, or prairie, thistle is a biennial found statewide in Colorado, common on the open grasslands of the eastern plains. It grows in sandy or gravelly soil in upland prairies, especially in disturbed sites, from 3,500 to 9,500 feet in elevation.

Identification

- Leaf base is long and decurrent, extending down the stem from the point of attachment.
- Leaves appear blue-green in color.
- Phyllaries are tipped with a yellow, reflexed spine that bends away from the flowering head.
- Flowers are often yellow-white but can also be pale lavender or pink, appearing May through September.



Rocky Mountain Thistle

Cirsium perplexans

Rocky Mountain thistle is a rare perennial with a taproot found in western Colorado, including Delta, Garfield, Mesa, Moffat, and Montrose counties. It grows on shale slopes, adobe hills in pinyon-juniper woodlands, or sagebrush communities from 5,000 to 8,000 feet in elevation.

Identification

- Stems are reddish.
- Leaves are toothed with faint yellow spines.
- Phyllaries are fringed with a dark purple tip.
- Flowers are purple or reddish-purple, appearing late May through early July.



Wavyleaf Thistle

(*Cirsium undulatum*)

Wavyleaf thistle is a biennial or a short-lived perennial found statewide in Colorado. It is common in eastern Colorado but rare west of the Continental Divide. It grows in sandy, gravelly soil in canyon bottoms, foothills, and sagebrush communities from 3,500 to 9,000 feet in elevation.

Identification

- Leaf base is short and sessile (attaching to the stem at the base of the leaf).
- Leaves appear grayish in color and are highly lobed with wavy margins.
- Flowering head is solitary.
- Phyllaries are narrow with reflexed spines that bend away from the flowering head.
- Flowers are pink, or occasionally cream or white, appearing June through August.
- Wavyleaf thistle appears similar to native yellowspine thistle. It is distinguished from yellowspine thistle by its solitary flowering heads with phyllaries that do not turn dark as they dry.



Yellowspine Thistle

(*Cirsium ochrocentrum*)

Yellowspine thistle is a biennial or short-lived perennial found in the eastern plains and Middle Park area of Colorado. It grows in dry sites in prairies and piedmont soils from 3,500 to 9,500 feet in elevation.

Identification

- Stems form in clumps on the plant, with individual stems that are densely leafy.
- Leaf base is long and decurrent, extending down the stem from the point of attachment.
- Phyllaries darken as they mature and have stout, yellow, reflexed spine tips that bend away from the flowering head.
- Flowers are reddish-purple, purple, pink, or rarely white, appearing June through September.
- Yellowspine thistle appears similar to noxious bull thistle and native wavyleaf thistle. It is distinguished from bull thistle by its lack of cobwebby phyllaries and from wavyleaf thistle by its stouter spines.



Bull Thistle

(*Cirsium vulgare*)

LIST B Noxious Weed in Colorado

Bull thistle is a biennial with a taproot found statewide in Colorado. It grows in wet, shaded areas from 3,500 to 9,000 feet in elevation. Bull thistle reproduces by seed.

Identification

- Leaves are clasping, deeply lobed, spiny and decurrent, extending down from the attachment point to the node below, with hairs that are short, rough and not at all woolly.
- Phyllaries are cobwebby and pubescent.
- Flowers are purple, appearing July through September.
- Plants can grow to 6 feet tall.



Canada Thistle

(*Cirsium arvense*)

LIST B Noxious Weed in Colorado

Canada thistle is a perennial found statewide in Colorado. Easily adaptable, it grows in nearly every habitat up to 9,000 feet in elevation. Canada thistle reproduces by rhizomes (underground stems) and seed.

Identification

- Leaves have shallow lobes and wavy margins, are not at all soft, with wooly or cobwebby hair.
- Flowering heads have phyllaries pressed against the flowering head, with flowers that are imperfect (having only female or male parts, not both).
- Flowers are pink, purple, or rarely white, appearing June through September.
- Plants can grow to 6 feet tall.



Musk or Nodding Thistle

(*Carduus nutans*)

LIST B Noxious Weed in Colorado

Musk, or nodding, thistle is a biennial with a taproot that is found statewide in Colorado. Easily adaptable, it grows in nearly every habitat up to 9,000 feet in elevation. Musk thistle reproduces prolifically by seed. It was first introduced to Colorado in 1953.

Identification

- Leaf base is long and decurrent, extending down the stem from the point of attachment.
- Leaves are somewhat lobed and wavy, with white outlined margins and a prominent, light green mid-vein on the leaf.
- Flowering heads are one per stem, subtended by broad, spreading, pinecone-like bracts.
- Flowers are purplish, appearing June through October.
- Flowering heads often tilt to one side or downwards (hence “nodding”).
- Plants can grow to 8 feet tall.



Plumeless thistle

(*Carduus acanthoides*)

LIST B Noxious Weed in Colorado

Plumeless thistle is a biennial with a taproot found statewide in Colorado. It is a roadside noxious weed in some mountain valleys, common and aggressive in Garfield, Pitkin, and Eagle counties. It grows in disturbed sites and along roadsides from 6,900 to 8,300 feet in elevation. Plumeless thistle reproduces by seed. It was first reported in Colorado in 1957.

Identification

- Rosettes possess wavy edges with yellow spines along margins.
- Stems are branching and covered with spiny wings extending to flowering heads.
- Leaves have a prominent white mid-rib similar to musk thistle leaves.
- Flowers are pink, red, and purple, appearing July through October.



Scotch Thistle

(*Onopordum acanthium*)

LIST B Noxious Weed in Colorado

Scotch thistle is a biennial with a taproot found statewide in Colorado. It grows in disturbed sites and along roadsides from 3,500 to 8,000 feet in elevation. Scotch thistle reproduces by seed.

Identification

- Leaves are covered with white hairs that give them a gray-blue color, especially at the rosette stage.
- Basil leaves are typically larger compared to other thistles.
- Phyllaries are cobwebby and reflexed, bending away from the flowering head.
- Flowers are large and purple, appearing June through August.
- Plants can grow to 12 feet tall and can form stands too dense for livestock to walk through.



Management of Invasive Thistles

In addition to providing landowners and land managers with tips and tools for distinguishing between native and non-native thistle species, this guide provides an overview of effective management techniques for controlling non-native thistle species. Of the five exotic thistle species in this guide, four are biennials, which present different management strategies and are less difficult to control than the deep-rooted perennial species, Canada thistle. When planning weed management, keep in mind that the best and most cost-effective tool for controlling or suppressing any weed species is restoring or establishing desirable, competitive vegetation.

Noxious Biennial Thistles

The four invasive non-native, biennial thistles—bull, musk, plumeless and Scotch—are all taprooted plants, reproducing only from seed. The key to managing these weeds is to prevent seed production each year and by doing so deplete the soil seed bank. Seed viability in the soil for these species is approximately 10 years, thus infestations must be monitored and managed following the initial treatment. Germination increases dramatically in high precipitation years, depleting the seed bank more quickly. However, the inverse occurs in drought years, making the process of weed control longer. Prevention or suppression of seed production and/or dispersal can be accomplished in various ways:

Pulling or digging: Be sure the top 3-4 inches of the taproot is removed or re-growth can occur. If the plants are in the bud stage or earlier, disposal is unnecessary since no seed has been produced. Once flowering starts, plants should be bagged and disposed of to prevent seed dispersal.



Mowing, clipping, and bagging: Removing seed heads can be effective if the plants are mature enough to prevent re-growth. Mowing thistle plants prior to flowering will result in re-growth and seed production from a reduced height. Mowing plants that are in the flowering/seed production stage does not prevent seed spread in the immediate area, but can reduce dispersal to adjoining areas.

Livestock grazing: Effects are similar to mowing or seed head clipping, depending on the growth stage of the plants. This provides suppression of infestations by reducing seed production, but keep in mind that intense grazing is detrimental to desirable vegetation. When using livestock grazing, managers need to be mindful of the possibility of movement of weed seed from one site to another by way of manure dispersal or seed carried on hooves and fur.



Herbicide control: Numerous herbicides provide effective control of thistle species. At higher rates some of these herbicides have detrimental effects on cool season grasses. One spray application in spring or early summer will control an infestation, but follow-up control efforts are necessary until the soil seed bank is depleted.



Biological control: Two insect biocontrol agents have been released for control of musk thistle: *Rhinocyllus conicus*, a seed-head feeding weevil and the crown feeding weevil *Trichosiromalus horridus*. *R. conicus* was first released in the western U.S. in 1969 with rather dubious results. At that time, there was little concern for biocontrol impacts on native thistles. *R. conicus* weevils fed on seed heads of musk thistle as well as several native thistle species and now present

a threat to rare native thistles. While these weevils are no longer released, they are present throughout Colorado. Their impact on musk thistle has been cyclical, in some years significantly reducing seed production and subsequent thistle populations. In other years, weevils have little or no effect. *T. horridus* feed on the center growth of the musk thistle rosette and may provide effective control, especially when *R. conicus* are present. Unlike *R. conicus*, *T. horridus* is still released for musk thistle control.

Canada Thistle Management

Canada thistle is a tenacious perennial weed requiring several seasons of management effort for effective control. Canada thistle reproduces by seed and rhizomes, though many will argue that spread by rhizomes is more significant. Management factors to keep in mind include:

Clipping: Removing seed heads provides suppression of seed production, but may be less effective than hand pulling.

Hand pulling: Removing a deep-rooted perennial plant using this method is ineffective unless the puller is extremely persistent. See picture on page 27.

Shallow tillage: Tillage, such as disking or sweeping, can actually be counterproductive. Re-growth is quick and the spread of root stalks results in Canada thistle stands becoming more dense and uniform than they were prior to tillage.

Mowing and/or grazing: These methods provide suppression of a perennial plant. Continuous depletion of carbohydrate reserves for re-growth of above ground tissue results in less aggressive plants. Mowing is a more effective tool when applied multiple times per growing season.



Biological control: Insect agents and a rust are available for suppressing Canada thistle. These biocontrol methods have passed a stringent screening process to ensure specificity to Canada thistle. Insect biocontrol releases have not had a significant impact on Canada thistle infestations, but rust has proven to be somewhat effective.



Canada thistle rust (Puccinia punctiformis).



Canada thistle rust shown here is an effective suppression tool.

Herbicide control: Selective and effective herbicides are available for control of Canada thistle. At higher rates, some herbicides have detrimental effects on cool season grasses. As previously stated, several seasons of management effort are necessary for effective control.



Colorado State University scientist Dr. Phil Waestra stands next to an experiment where one Canada thistle plant was watered for 18 months resulting in a significant increase in biomass above and below ground.

Thistle Look-Alikes

This section offers helpful tips for indentifying plants commonly mistaken for thistles.



Prickly Poppy is a native perennial species with spiny leaves.



Jeweled Blazingstar is a native perennial species with spiny dark green leaves that grows in rocky shale.



Sowthistle is an introduced species that lacks spines on the involucre.



Salsify is an introduced, sometimes invasive plant that does not branch and has sepals that are not sharp.

Glossary

Terms related to life cycle:

Annual: Completes entire life cycle in one season only.

Biennial: Of two years duration. A biennial plant produces a rosette of basal leaves the first year, then in the second year it sends up a flower stalk, produces seed, and dies.

Perennial: Living year after year.

Terms related to the flowering head:

Involucre: A circle or cluster of bracts at the base of a flower head. In thistles, the shape of the involucre is often a helpful ID feature.

Bract: A much reduced leaf. In thistles, bracts make up the involucre, or circle of bracts at the base of the flower head. In thistles, bract shape, margin, aspect, color, and the presence or absence of a spine at the tip can provide essential ID information.

Phyllary: A more precise term for a bract of the involucre in the family Asteraceae.

Reflexed: Bent abruptly down or away from the flowering stem axis. Noting if the phyllaries (bracts) or phyllary spines of a thistle's involucre are reflexed can provide essential ID information.

Terms related to leaves, roots or growth habit:

Acaulescent: Having no stem. The flower stalk, if present, is leafless.

Rosette: A cluster of closely crowded radiating leaves at ground level. Biennial thistles produce a rosette in the first growing season.



Example of a musk thistle rosette.

Decurrent leaves: Leaves that continue down the stem beyond the point of attachment.

Sessile: Attaching to the stem at the base of the leaf.

Taproot: A primary, often fleshy, vertical root.

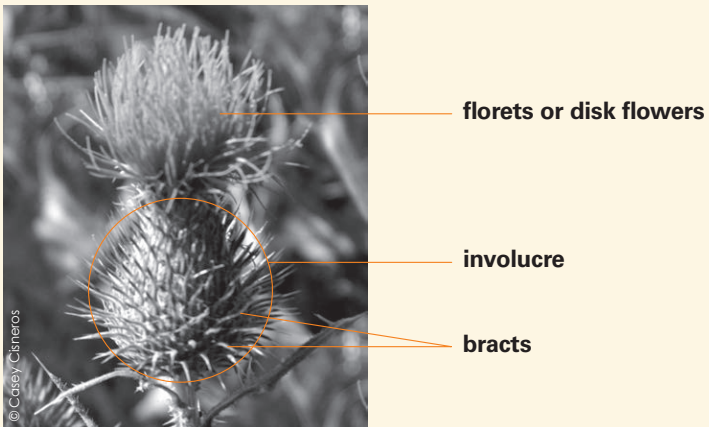
Rhizome: A horizontal, underground stem capable of rooting and shooting at the nodes.

Terms related to an individual thistle flower:

Disk flower: The radially symmetrical, much reduced flower making up the flower head in thistles. All thistles lack ray flowers or petals.

Pappus: Appendages at the apex of the ovary in the family *Asteraceae*. In thistles, the genus *Cirsium* has plumose (feathery) pappus similar to the fluff found on dandelion seeds.

Typical Thistle Flower Head



Florets are individual flowers grouped to appear as one flower.

Involucre appears like a flower bud and can take on the shape of a cup, urn, or basket.

Bracts can be smooth, fringed, papery, or spiny.

Sources

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The Colorado State University herbarium is another great resource to learn about Colorado flora with its catalogue of pressed specimen samples and thoroughly knowledgeable staff.



Red Mountain Open Space

Larimer County Weed District Services

The Larimer County Weed District is part of the County's Land Stewardship Program, which strives to minimize the occurrence of weeds and associated negative impacts on native plant communities, agricultural lands, and public corridors in Larimer County, Colorado. The district provides a variety of services to help you manage plants on your property.

Site Visits: Staff can visit your property to identify plants and tree pests and provide treatment recommendations using best management practices.

Cost-Share Program: If you live within the Weed District boundary, you can receive reimbursements to reduce the cost of herbicides and mowing.

Herbicide Sales: Buy herbicides for range, pasture, and natural areas at the Weed District Office. This service is available to all Larimer County residents.

Do Not Spray Requests: Request that Larimer County not spray the roadside adjacent to your property with pesticides. You must submit your request annually.

Request a Speaker: Staff is available to present on vegetation management to classes, clubs, home owners associations, and other groups. Call (970) 498-5768 to schedule a presentation.

Visit larimer.org/weeds for:

- Suggestions on weed control
- Weed District boundary
- Lists of local applicators, consultants, mowers, and seed companies
- State noxious weed lists
- Help identifying a weed
- Reporting an insect or plant pest
- More information on services





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