

A decorative teal L-shaped border is positioned around the text, with a vertical bar on the left and a horizontal bar at the top, and another vertical bar on the right and a horizontal bar at the bottom.

**NATIVE AND
INVASIVE THISTLES
OF SAN MIGUEL AND
OURAY COUNTIES**

IT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW YOUR NATIVES!

There are five noxious weed species of thistles in Colorado. But did you know that there are around 20 native thistles species?

WHY WE NEED OUR NATIVES

- Native thistles are frequently visited by pollinators such as bumblebees, butterflies, moths, and beetles.
- Birds, such as goldfinches, use the pappus bristles to line their nests.
- Native thistles are not aggressive invaders like their nonnative thistle counterparts, and are a part of a healthy landscape.

HOW TO GENERALLY TELL NATIVE AND INVASIVE THISTLES APART

- If the stand of thistles is very dense or very tall (6 feet), it is usually noxious.
- If you are above timberline and see a thistle, it's probably native.
- Native thistles tend to be short, and are usually only found as individual plants or in very small groups of 2 to 4 plants

NATIVE THISTLES

Cainville thistle (*Cirsium calcareum*)



- Found in Southwestern Colorado
- Found in foothills, pinyon-juniper woodlands and rocky flats in sandy soil; 5,000 to 8,400 feet in elevation
- Duration: Biennial or perennial
- Leaves grayish; tomentose (woolly-cottony) beneath.
- Flowering heads exserted (sticking out beyond) from the upper leaves. Flowering head appears pineapple-like before bloom. Phyllary spines 7 to 8 mm long.
- **Corolla lobes at least twice as long as tube**
- Flowers purplish-red; June through September
- Seed head resembles Canada thistle
- Uncommon

Photo source: Mary Ellen (Mel) Harte, Bugwood.org

Eaton's thistle (*Cirsium eatonii*)



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- Mountainous areas of Colorado
- Found on rocky open slopes, road banks and in meadows; 8,000-13,500 feet in elevation
- Duration: Biennial or perennial
- Leaves narrow, whorled and densely spiny with numerous closely spaced lobes. Stems taper toward the top; Stems are soft; not spiny or winged
- Flower head cluster subtended by leaves extending past the cluster. Phyllaries with spiny margins and a stout terminal spine.
- **Phyllary margins with interconnecting hairs (like 2 combs side by side)**
- Flowers rose-purple or white; July through September
- Prevalent along the Continental Divide

Photo source: Mary Ellen (Mel) Harte, Bugwood.org

Elk or Meadow thistle (*Cirsium scariosum*)



Photo source: Steve Dewey, Utah State University,
Bugwood.org

Elk or Meadow thistle

- Found in forest clearings, along streams, roadsides and wet meadows; 7,000-12,500 feet in elevation
- Duration: Biennial or short-lived perennial
- Two growth habits: a short plant with a massive rosette of lobed, spiny basal leaves with a cluster of sessile (stemless) flowering heads; or, a taller plant with sessile flowering heads in leaf axils.
- **Only thistle that can be acaulescent**
- Stems soft, lacking spines
- Cluster of flower heads subtended by leaves that extend past the cluster
- Phyllaries smooth and glossy; the back covered with minute yellowish glands
- Flowers white; June through September

Mountain thistle (*Cirsium scopulorum*)



Photo source: Mary Ellen (Mel) Harte, Bugwood.org

Mountain thistle



- Mountainous areas of Colorado
- Grows in tundra, boulder fields and scree along the Continental Divide; 9,000-13,000 feet in elevation
- Duration: Biennial
- Basal leaves long and very spiny
- Stems are very woolly, not spiny, and are covered with overlapping leaves
- Densely woolly, massive flowering heads congested in often nodding or slouching terminal clusters subtended by leaves extending past the cluster
- Flowers yellow, white or less often, pinkish; July through September
- Common along the Continental Divide

Photo source: Dave Powell, USDA Forest Service (retired), Bugwood.org

New Mexico thistle (*Cirsium neomexicanum*)



Photo source: Steve Dewey, Utah State University,
Bugwood.org

New Mexico thistle

- Southwest Colorado
- Found on canyonsides, roadsides and dry open slopes, often in clay or shale soil; 4,500-6,900 feet in elevation
- Duration: Biennial or short-lived perennial
- Leaves have a grayish cast. Leaves lack long, woody spines; stems lack spines or wings
- Phyllaries have loose tufts of soft, cottony hairs; **lower bracts bent abruptly downwards at midpoint**
- Flowers white to pink; May through July
- Look-alikes: bull, Scotch and plumeless thistles. Unarmed stems and leaves as well as flower color distinguish this thistle from look-alikes.

Parry's thistle (*Cirsium parryi*)



[Source for Parry's thistle photos](#)

Parry's thistle



- South central Colorado
- Grows in open subalpine forests and alpine meadows; 8,500-12,500 feet in elevation
- Duration: Biennial, perennial
- Leaves clasping, shallowly lobed; hairless above, cobwebby below
- Outer phyllaries spiny-margined with long, cobwebby hairs.
- Terminal spine is straight (not reflexed or bent away from the flower head)
- Flowering heads often in a branched inflorescence
- Flowers greenish-yellow; June through August

[Source for Parry's thistle photos](#)

Platte or Prairie thistle (*Cirsium canescens*)



- Statewide
- Grows in sandy or gravelly soil in upland prairies, especially disturbed sites; 3,500-9,000 feet in elevation
- Duration: Biennial
- Leaf base long-decurrent on the stem
- Leaves blue-green in color; upper leaves reduced
- Phyllaries tipped with a yellow, reflexed (bends away from the flowering head) spine.
- Flowers yellowish-white or rarely, pale lavender or pink; May through September
- Common on the open grasslands of eastern plains

Photo by Kent Pfeiffer

Wavyleaf thistle (*Cirsium undulatum*)



- Statewide, more common in eastern Colorado
- Grows in sandy, gravelly soil in canyon bottoms, foothills and sagebrush communities; 3,500-9,000 feet in elevation on the Front Range
- Duration: Biennial or a short-lived perennial
- Leaf base not long-decurrent on the stem
- Leaves grayish; highly lobed with wavy-margins
- Solitary flowering head
- Phyllaries narrow, phyllary spines are reflexed (bent away from flowering head).
- Flowers purple or cream; June and August
- **Subspecies *tracyi* is more commonly found on the Western slope**
- Look-alikes: yellowspine thistle (wavyleaf has solitary flowering head and lacks dark phyllaries as they dry)

Photo source: Eric Coombs, Oregon Department of Agriculture, Bugwood.org

INVASIVE THISTLES

Bull thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*)



Photo source: Steve Dewey, Utah State University,
Bugwood.org

Bull thistle

- Erect biennial
- Long sharp spines on leaves
- Hairy leaves with course hairs on top and woolly hairs on underside
- Flower heads are “teardrop” shaped with spines extending around the base
- Pink to magenta flower heads
- Spines along entire stem
- Usually less than 5 feet tall
- Reproduces by seed

Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*)



- Has rhizomes and rarely takes on a rosette growth habit
- Flowers are pink to purple, sometimes white
- Alternately arranged lance shaped leaves
- Leaf margins range from smooth to spiny to somewhat toothed or lobed
- Hairs typically on underside of leaves
- Stems are both hairy and without hairs
- Reproduces by seeds and rhizomes

Photo source: Steve Dewey, Utah State University, Bugwood.org

Musk thistle (*Carduus nutans*)



- Large thick taproot that is hollow near surface
- Large pink to purple flowers, which are flatter and the size of a half dollar
- Mostly lacks hairs on the upper surface of leaves. Leaves are waxy with a yellowish to white spine at tip
- 1 to 6 feet tall at maturity
- Reproduces by seed

Photo source: Steve Dewey, Utah State University, Bugwood.org