



Identification of Thistles in Nevada

Susan Donaldson, Water Quality Education Specialist, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension
Dawn Rafferty, State Weed Specialist, Nevada Dept. of Agriculture
Arnold Thiem, Associate Botanist, University of Nevada, Reno Herbarium

Thistles are troublesome invasive weeds throughout much of Nevada. Several species of thistles are named on Nevada's 2003 noxious weed list, including:

- *Cirsium arvense*, Canada thistle
- *Carduus nutans*, musk thistle
- *Onopordum acanthium*, Scotch thistle
- *Sonchus arvensis*, perennial sowthistle

These invasive weeds can be easily misidentified, resulting in potential damage to desirable plant species and selection of ineffective control measures. The table on the reverse side of this fact sheet provides descriptions to help identify the four species listed above, as well as several native thistles that are commonly mistaken for them, including *Cirsium andersonii* (Anderson's thistle), *Cirsium occidentale* (snowy thistle) and *Cirsium douglasii* (Douglas thistle). Plants can be identified based on flower color, bract shape and coloration, leaves, and stems. The flowers of each thistle on Nevada's noxious weed list are pictured here.



Canada thistle



Scotch thistle



Musk thistle



Perennial sow-thistle

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, not spiny	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