

# Thistles

## SUMMARY

Thistles are **herbaceous biennials or perennials** with **alternate, lobed, spiny leaves** and (sometimes) spiny stems. As part of the aster family, thistles have composite flowers with each flowerhead made up of many tiny florets. **Flowers are purple to pink** and range in size from 0.5" - 3". In spring, thistles grow as **basal rosettes of spiny, lobed leaves**. **Seeds are brown with long tufts of white hairs** to aid wind dispersal.

## LOOK ALIKES

- There are several native thistles in Wisconsin, with similar **stature, leaves, and flowers** to invasive thistles. Native and invasive thistles can be differentiated based on leaf characteristics (color, hairiness, etc.), flower characteristics (size and number of flowers, size and color of bracts at base of flowerhead), and habitat.
- Spotted knapweed (*Centaurea stoebe*) and similar knapweeds can have similar **quantity, size, and color flowerheads** to Canada thistle. However, these knapweeds **do not have spiny leaves**.



Scientific Name	Common Name	NR 40
<i>Carduus acanthoides</i>	Plumeless thistle	R
<i>Carduus nutans</i>	Musk (nodding) thistle	R
<i>Cirsium arvense</i>	Canada thistle	R
<i>Cirsium palustre</i>	European marsh thistle	P/R
<i>Cirsium vulgare</i>	Bull thistle	none

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Scientific Name	Common Name	Stem	Leaves	Flowers
<i>Carduus acanthoides</i>	Plumeless thistle	Densely covered with leafy, spine-tipped "wings"; 3-6'	Deeply lobed, wavy around edges, very spiny; hairy on underside of leaf, esp. on midrib	1" purple (sometimes white) flowerheads; solitary or in clusters of 2-5; bracts narrow, spreading, short spiny tips; July – Oct.
<i>Carduus nutans</i>	Musk (nodding) thistle	Not spiny directly below flowerhead; spiny "wings" where leaf bases extend down stem; 2-7'	Deeply lobed, spines along wavy edges, may have white cast on edges	2-3" purple to pinkish flowerheads, often nodding, solitary; bracts large, triangular, showy; June – Oct.
<i>Cirsium arvense</i>	Canada thistle	Slightly ridged, may have scattered hairs, not usually spiny; 3-5'	Deeply lobed, up to 6" long, yellow spines scattered along wavy edges, may be hairy on underside	¾", lavender to pale pink (sometimes white), solitary or in small clusters at ends of branching stems; bracts flat except for pointed purplish tip that peels away from flowerhead; June – Oct.
<i>Cirsium palustre</i>	European marsh thistle	Very sharp spiny "wings" where leaf bases extend down stem; densely to moderately hairy; 2-7'	Deeply lobed with sharp spine at tip of each lobe, wavy edges; upper side variably hairy, underside densely hairy esp. along veins	¾" lavender to pinkish-purple flowerheads in tight clusters at top of stem and ends of long branches; green to purple-tinged bracts flat except for darker tip that peels away from flowerhead, fringed with hairs around edges; June – Aug.
<i>Cirsium vulgare</i>	Bull thistle	Hairy, covered with small, leafy, spine-tipped "wings"; 2-6'	Lobed with 3+ narrow lobes, each with ½" sharp, yellowish spine at tip; hairy on upper surface; woolly underside	1 ½ - 2" reddish-purple flowerhead, solitary or a few clustered at ends of branching stems; bracts narrow, spreading, tipped with short spines; June – Oct.