

# Thistle comparisons + look alikes

Name	Life cycle	Stem	Leaves	Flowers
Canada thistle ( <i>Cirsium arvense</i> )	<b>Perennial, creeping roots</b>	3-5', <b>slightly ridged</b> , may have scattered hairs, <b>not usually spiny</b>	Deeply lobed, up to 6" long; <b>yellow spines scattered along wavy edges</b> , may be hairy on underside	<b>¾"</b> , lavender to pale pink, solitary or in small clusters; <b>bracts flat except for pointed purplish tip</b> that peels away from flowerhead
Plumeless thistle ( <i>Carduus acanthoides</i> )	Biennial, taproot	3-6', <b>densely covered with spiny wings</b>	Deeply lobed, wavy around edges, very spiny; <b>hairy on underside of leaf, especially on midrib</b>	<b>1"</b> purple (sometimes white); solitary or in clusters of 2-5; <b>bracts narrow, spreading</b> , short spiny tips
Musk (nodding) thistle ( <i>Carduus nutans</i> )	Biennial, taproot	2-8', spiny wings, but <b>not spiny directly below flowerhead</b>	Deeply lobed, spines along wavy edges, may have white cast on edges; <b>hairless; white midrib</b>	<b>2-3"</b> purple to pinkish, <b>often nodding</b> , solitary; <b>bracts large, triangular, showy</b>
European marsh thistle ( <i>Cirsium palustre</i> )	Biennial, taproot	2-7', sharp spiny wings; densely to moderately hairy; usually leafless below flowers	Deeply lobed with sharp spine at tip of each lobe; wavy edges; upper side variably hairy, <b>underside densely hairy especially along veins</b>	<b>¾"</b> lavender to pinkish-purple, in <b>tight clusters</b> ; <b>green to purple-tinged bracts flat except for darker tip</b> that peels away from flowerhead, fringed with <b>hairs around edges</b>
Bull thistle ( <i>Cirsium vulgare</i> )	Biennial, taproot	2-6', hairy, covered with small, spiny wings	Lobed, each with ½" sharp, yellowish spine at tip; <b>hairy on upper surface; woolly underside</b>	1 ½ - 2" reddish-purple flowerhead, solitary or a few clustered; <b>bracts narrow, spreading, tipped with short spines</b>

There are several **native biennial thistles**: field thistle (*Cirsium discolor*), tall thistle (*C. altissimum*), swamp thistle (*C. muticum*), dune thistle (*C. pitcheri*), and Hill's thistle (*C. pumilum*). They are generally less spiny than the invasive thistles. **Dune thistle** is rare, grows on sand dunes and has white to cream flowers. **Hill's thistle** is also rare and is much shorter (1-2') than the other thistles with reddish purple flowers. The other native thistles all have bracts that are green with a white strip down the center. **Swamp thistle** bracts have cottony webbing between. **Field thistle** and **tall thistle** leaves are densely hairy and white underneath.