

Colorado Thistles: the good, the bad and the ugly

By Patricia Butler, CO Native Plant Society Boulder Chapter June 12, 2020

According to *Flora of Colorado* (Ackerfield 2015), Colorado has 18 native thistles and half a dozen non-native invasives. Well-meaning hikers sometimes pull or destroy natives mistaking them for non-natives. These photos can help distinguish the natives from the non-natives. Even non-natives should not be removed unless one is certain of their identity; when in doubt about plant identification, send a photo and location information to expert staff in public agencies (the city, county, and US Forest Service) for confirmation. (Note that flower color varies in all these species and is not a reliable ID characteristic.) A useful booklet with more detail on all thistles found in Colorado created by the Larimer County Weed District is available at <https://www.larimer.org/sites/default/files/uploads/2017/finaltg2nded.pdf>.

Native thistles commonly seen in the Front Range

Cirsium ochrocentrum

(Yellowspine thistle)

Long yellow spines on
Involucre and leaves
Long leaf decurrence on stem



Cirsium undulatum

(Wavyleaf thistle)

shorter spines
short leaf decurrence
(grows in similar areas)



Cirsium flodmanii

(Flodman's thistle)

moist habitats



Cirsium Scopulorum

(Frosty ball or Mountain thistle)

Very showy; grows in rock
Highest elevations: up to 13,500'



Cirsium scariosum

(Elk or Meadow thistle)

Can be acaulescent: flower clusters stemless in rosette of leaves
7000 – 10,000 ft elevation



Cirsium clavatum

(Fish Lake thistle)

Now includes 2 varieties:
Clavatum & americanum
(formerly *C. centaureae*)
7000-10,000 ft elevation



Cirsium eatonii

Eaton's thistle)

rocky and forested slopes
9500 – 12,000 ft elevation



Non-Native thistles commonly seen in Front Range

Cirsium arvense

(Canada thistle)

ypically grows in dense patches with
Many small flowers



Carduus nutans

(Musk thistle)

Fleshy involucre resembles an
artichoke



Onopordum acanthium

(Scotch thistle)

Spiny plant w/ large grey-green leaves
can grow 6-10 feet tall

