

Colorado Thistles: the good, the bad and the ugly

By Patricia Butler, CO Native Plant Society Boulder Chapter (April 25, 2021)

According to *Flora of Colorado* (Ackerfield 2015, but some species names have recently changed and are noted below), Colorado has 21 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 most of these species and is not a very 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
3500 – 9500 ft elevation



Cirsium undulatum

(Wavyleaf thistle)
shorter spines
short leaf decurrence
4800 – 8500 ft elevation



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 tiogatum

("dinnerplate" thistle)
7000 – 12,500 ft elevation

Cirsium coloradense

(Colorado thistle)
7000 – 12,500 ft elevation



Cirsium centaureae
(Centaury thistle)
7000-10,000 ft elevation



Cirsium griseum
(Gray thistle)
rocky and forested slopes
9500 – 12,000 ft elevation



Non-Native thistles commonly seen in Front Range

Cirsium arvense
(Canada thistle)
typically 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

