

# Native Thistles versus Exotic Thistles

**Not ALL thistles are bad!** Native thistles are very important nectar and food plants for pollinators. Thistles provide nectar for Monarch butterflies on their long fall migration. Goldfinches wait to nest until the first thistles bloom, and line their nests with the soft down. However, 3 exotic invasive thistles are noxious weeds and should be controlled. **Check before you spray! The leaves of exotics are typically green on both sides, while leaves of natives usually have whitened woolly undersides.** Exotic thistles also tend to have heavily branched stems and more numerous flower heads per stem.

## Exotic invasive Musk Thistle (*Carduus nutans*)



Biennial. Very prickly. Leaves not hairy. Leaves same color both sides. Blooms June-July.



## Native Field Thistle (*Cirsium discolor*)

“Weediest” of the natives and fairly prickly. Found in fields and roadsides. Biennial or short-lived perennial that needs disturbed soil to germinate. Does not spread by creeping roots. Blooms July-Oct



Leaves whitened underneath



## Exotic invasive Bull Thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*)



Biennial. Very prickly. Blooms June - Sept.



Leaves green underneath

## Native Tall Thistle (*Cirsium altissimum*)

Typically in woods, less common in fields. Not very prickly. Blooms July-Oct.



## Exotic invasive Canada Thistle (*Cirsium arvense*)



Perennial. Not common in MO. Leaves are variable: best determined by clusters of smaller flowers and creeping root system (versus tap roots in natives). Blooms June-Oct



## Native Carolina Thistle (*Cirsium carolinianum*)

Biennial or short-lived perennial. Found in open woodlands. Very unlikely in fields. Narrow stems and leaves; hardly prickly. Blooms May-June.

