

## BWSR Featured Plant

**Name:** Field Thistle (*Cirsium discolor*)

**Plant Family:** Asteraceae (Aster)

Statewide Wetland  
Indicator Status:

- GP & MW: FACU
- NC/NE: UPL



Field Thistle flower and bracts with spines  
Image by Sarah Foltz Jordon of Xerces Society

Of the nine species of thistle found in Minnesota, five are native. As one of our native thistles, Field Thistle, also called Pasture Thistle, is not invasive or weedy. While mammals avoid its spiny bracts and leaves, many pollinators are enticed by the abundant nectar of its flowers and birds such as goldfinches feed on its seeds. Native Americans utilized the roots as edibles and to treat wounds and ailments. Field Thistles are a low-maintenance and late flowering addition to pollinator plantings.

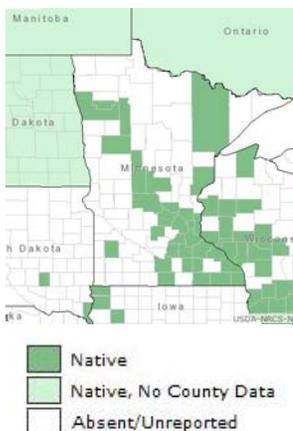
### Identification

The easiest way to identify Field Thistle is by its leaves, which are up to 9 inches long and 3 inches wide, with several narrow lobes that have spiny edges and tips. They are distinctly white on the underside from a mat of fine hairs. The flower heads are light pink to lavender (rarely white), 1 ½ to 2 inches across, and bloom in late summer to early fall. One main stem may have several flower

heads at the ends of lateral branches. The base of the flower head consists of light green overlapping bracts that resemble fish scales. Each bract has a ¼ inch needle-like spine sticking out from the bract tip. The stems of Field Thistle have white hairs and are not spiny. Growing initially as a basal rosette of leaves in its first year, the plant can extend upward to 8 feet tall.



White underside of leaf  
Image by Sarah Foltz Jordon of Xerces Society



Range based on University  
of MN Herbarium data

### Range

Field Thistle is native from eastern to central United States as well as eastern to central Canada. In Minnesota, it is common and abundant across the state where it is found in prairies, roadsides, forests, and in disturbed or abandoned sites. Iowa and Arkansas list the species, as well as other native thistles as noxious weeds.

## Uses

Abundant in nectar with large flowers, Field Thistle is a valuable species for butterflies, bees, moths, and hummingbirds. The Thistle Long-horned bee (*Melissodes desponsa*) is a specialist pollinator for thistles. Painted Lady butterfly (*Vanessa cardui*) caterpillars feed on the leaves. Seed eating birds like the American goldfinch are drawn to its abundant seeds and use tufts of hair from the flowers as nest lining material. Roots were used by Native Americans to treat stomach aches and for treating wounds by forming a paste.

### Primary Uses:

- Flower/pollinator gardens
- Medicinal
- Wildlife habitat



Plant with multiple blooms  
Image by Jim Eckberg of Xerces Society

## Planting Recommendations

The species prefers full sun, loam or clay-loam soils, and average to dry soil moisture. Planting should be done in late fall or early spring after the last frost into bare soil where competing plants are reduced. Field Thistle is a biennial plant and will die after flowers produce mature seeds, but will reseed itself regularly. It does not spread via rhizomes, only by seed. Once established, it is a hearty plant that should require no additional watering. If planted in the spring and able to grow throughout the summer, the plant will likely bloom the following late summer. If planted in fall, blooms will appear after two winters. To increase the size of plants, give it plenty of space by reducing competition from surrounding plants.

### Planting Methods

- Seed
- Containerized plants

## Similar Species



Leaves of Tall Thistle  
Image by Jim Eckberg of Xerces Society

Tall Thistle (*Cirsium altissimum*) is another native thistle that has similar spiny flower bracts and leaves are also white on the underside. Mid-leaves of Tall Thistle are elliptic, not lobed. Its stems are spineless like other native thistles.

Canada Thistle (*Cirsium arvense*) is an invasive, noxious weed in Minnesota, originating in Europe. Leaves are spiny, lobed, and wavy. Flower bracts have purple tips, but no spines. Stems are not usually spiny and may be hairy.



Images by Katy Chayka (top) and Peter Dziuk (bottom) of Minnesota Wildflowers

## References

<https://www.minnesotawildflowers.info>, <http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info>, <https://plants.usda.gov>, [https://plants.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs\\_cidi.pdf](https://plants.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs_cidi.pdf), <http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/news/webnews/March%202013/plant.pdf>

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