

The Lake Tahoe Basin is home to many species of wildflowers, including beneficial native thistles that provide food and habitat for local wildlife. However, many areas in the basin are infested with several species of invasive thistles that crowd out desirable plant species, altering plant communities.

Not only are these invasive weeds difficult to control and unpleasant to walk through, they also displace native vegetation, decrease wildlife habitat, alter normal ecological processes, and reduce recreational uses. In addition, they cost us millions of dollars each year in treatment costs, decreased land productivity and decreased land value.

If you look closely, there are many clues that will help you identify the various local thistles. When you find invasive weeds, report the location to the appropriate county (see back panel). Ask experts to confirm the identity of invasive thistles before applying control measures.

### Quick Guide to Identifying Thistles

Invasive Thistles	
Bull thistle	Vase-shaped flower; spiny, winged stem; rough, bumpy leaves
Canada thistle	Smallest thistle; very spiny; grows in moist locations
Musk thistle	Largest flower; single, sometimes nodding flower at end of stem; hairless leaves
Scotch thistle	Largest thistle; grayish-green hairy appearance; soft, hairy leaves
Native Thistles	
Anderson's thistle	No spines on stems; red, cylindrical flower
Elk thistle	Flat, no stems; pale flower
Snowy thistle	Whitish appearance; red flowers

## Natives ... Do Not Disturb!

### Snowy Thistle

(*Cirsium occidentale* var. *candidissimum*)

- ❖ Biennial
- ❖ Has eye-catching white stems and leaves and bright-red flowers.
- ❖ Flower head is cylinder-shaped with a single flower at the end of the stem.
- ❖ Plant is white and wooly.
- ❖ Whitish leaves are long, narrow, and lobed.



### Anderson's Thistle

(*Cirsium andersonii*)

- ❖ Biennial
- ❖ Flower head is cylinder-shaped with a single flower at the end of the stem.
- ❖ Flower color is rose-red to reddish in color.
- ❖ Leaves are divided and wavy, with spiny edges.
- ❖ Stems are purplish and thornless.
- ❖ Appears more delicate than other thistles.
- ❖ Is most commonly confused with bull thistle.

### Elk Thistle (*Cirsium scariosum*)

- ❖ Biennial
- ❖ Stemless, white to pale-lavender flowers extend directly from the rosette.
- ❖ Leaves are lobed, somewhat spiny and pale-green.
- ❖ Usually has no stems. Forms flat to the ground; generally less than 1 foot tall.



### For more information, contact:

#### NEVADA

Douglas County:  
Weed District  
(775) 782-9835

Washoe County:  
University of Nevada Cooperative Extension  
(775) 784-4848

#### CALIFORNIA

El Dorado County:  
Department of Agriculture  
(530) 621-5520

Placer County:  
Department of Agriculture  
(530) 889-7372

# Know Your Thistles!

Learn to distinguish desirable native thistles from weedy invasive thistles in the Lake Tahoe Basin

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Native Anderson's Thistle at Lake Tahoe



LAKE TAHOE BASIN  
WEED COORDINATING GROUP

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## Invasive Thistles ...

## Management Required!

### Bull Thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*)

- Biennial
- Vase-shaped flowers occur in clusters at the ends of the branches, and are pink to purple in color.
- Tops of leaves are rough, with a sandpaper-like texture, and undersides of leaves are cottony and soft.
- Leaves have a prominently raised main vein.
- Stems have spiny wings.

#### Management:

Dig, removing at least 2 inches of root.  
Chemical controls are available.



### Musk Thistle

(*Carduus nutans*)

- Biennial
- Single, very large, disk-shaped flowers are at the ends of bent, naked stems.
- Flowers are deep-pink to purple.
- Purplish bracts are large and spiny.
- Leaves are smooth, with prominent light-green midribs and spiny edges.

#### Management:

Dig, removing at least 2 inches of the root.  
Chemical controls are available.



## Invasive Thistles ...

## Management Required!

### Scotch Thistle (*Onopordum acanthium*)

- Biennial
- Flowers are in groups of two or three on branched stems.
- Flowers are purple, and flower heads resemble a flattened globe.
- Leaves are very hairy, with a grayish-green appearance.
- Stems are spiny and winged.
- Grows to 10 feet tall.

#### Management:

Dig, removing at least 2 inches of root.  
Chemical controls are available.



### Canada Thistle

(*Cirsium arvense*)

- Perennial
- Multiple small flower heads grow in clusters on each stem.
- Flowers are light-purple to white with teardrop-shaped heads.
- Bracts are small and flat against flower head with weak tips; they are not spiny.
- Leaves are smooth, deeply lobed, and extremely spiny.
- Grows in moist locations.

#### Management:

Pulling and cutting do not provide control.  
Chemical applications must be repeated for several years.

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