

NAME THAT THISTLE

Brian Sebade

Thistles come in all shapes and sizes: tall, short, big, little, spiny or spineless, with pink flowers or white flowers, tap root or spreading root systems.

Regardless of shape or size, thistles can be a nuisance to humans. These plants are well-adapted to

disturbed areas and harsh growing conditions. Wyoming hosts many native and non-native thistles. On page 11 are two native and four introduced thistles to Wyoming. Can you match each plant to the flower shown?

A. Musk thistle – Introduced from Europe, flowers of this thistle are large and attractive. Stems near the flower are almost devoid of spines. Plants are biennial and often reach 6 feet tall. Look for this thistle in pastures, rangelands, and disturbed areas. On Wyoming’s Designated Noxious Weed List.

B. Scotch thistle – The basal leaves of this thistle are very large, sometimes reaching 1-foot wide and 2 feet long. Plants are biennial and can grow 11-12 feet tall. Flowers are purple and have spines on the base of the stem near the flower. On Wyoming’s Designated Noxious Weed List.

C. Canada thistle – Found extensively throughout Wyoming, this thistle is common to pastures, rangelands, roadsides, and many other disturbed areas. This persistent plant spreads via underground stems known as rhizomes. Each plant is either male or female. Flowers are purple and are smaller than those of most other thistles. On Wyoming’s Designated Noxious Weed List.

D. Wavyleaf thistle – This native is common throughout much of Wyoming and also produces purple flowers. As a perennial, the thistle has a deep taproot for collecting moisture during warm and dry periods. Spines on the leaves can reach 2.5 inches long. There is a white stripe on the bracts. Look for plants growing along roadsides and in rangelands.

E. Bull thistle – A native of Europe, this thistle has some nasty spines on its leaf tips. Leaves are shaped similar to a bird’s foot. Plants can reach several feet high and have purple flowers. This plant is found in many rangelands, pastures, and disturbed areas.

F. Elk thistle – This thistle is a native Wyoming plant found growing in moist meadows of montane and foothill zones. Plants have purple-to-white flowers that form in clusters at the top of the stem. Plants are perennial and can reach several feet in height.

The University of Wyoming has a handy Wyoming Weed Identification Site <http://bit.ly/idwyoweed>, but we’re encouraging readers test their own knowledge first before answering the questions!

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6. Wavyleaf thistle
5. Scotch thistle
4. Musk thistle
3. Elk thistle
2. Canada thistle
1. Bull thistle

KEY

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