

CANADA THISTLE

Cirsium arvense

Status in Maine: widespread



Description: A creeping perennial herb, 2-5' tall, and member of the aster family. **Leaves:** Alternate, oblong, to 8", base sessile to stem clasping; margins variable, entire to deeply lobed, often wavy or crinkled looking, and very spiny. **Flowers:** Each "flower" is a compound head of ~50 flowers. Plant is mostly dioecious. Flower heads are ~½" diameter, ~1" long, and flask shaped. Several pale lilac to pinkish-purple flower heads per branching stem. Flower bracts are not spiny. **Fruit/seeds:** Each tiny, tan-colored achene has a long feathery pappus with branched hairs. **Stem:** Hollow, subtly ribbed, with few hairs. Freely branching toward top. **Root:** Has both a deep taproot (~3'), and spreading horizontal rhizomes.

Native range: Eurasia. **How arrived in U.S.:** Introduced to Canada in the 1600s as a contaminant in crop seeds.

Reproduction: Formidable capacity by both rhizomatous spread and seed production. With ~40 flower heads per plant, each plant can produce roughly 1,500 seeds. Its plumose pappus aids long distance seed dispersal. Seeds can remain viable for decades in the soil. Horizontal roots produce numerous shoots and can spread several meters in a season. Small fragments of stem or root can generate new plants.

Habitat: Disturbed sites, roadsides, agricultural areas, stream banks, floodplains, logging roads and landings. Shade intolerant.

Similar native species: Swamp thistle (*Cirsium discolor*) has larger flower heads. Leaves are more deeply lobed than Canada thistle, and not as spiny.



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Similar non-native species: Bull thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*) is typically a larger, more robust plant, with spiny stem and a long spine on leaf midrib. Flower heads are ~2".

Control methods: Suppression can be achieved by repeated mowing (several times per season for several years), pulling, and/or cutting that exhausts the plant and eliminates seed production. Wear protective gear since the spines are sharp! Mechanical actions that result in fragmented shoots and roots are not recommended as these can create new plants if conditions are favorable. Sheep and goats are said to graze it when plants are young. Different ecotypes of Canada thistle have differing responses to herbicides, and the plants substantial below-ground biomass means that more than one application may be needed per growing season. One study found good control when the plant was cut in late July and then treated with glyphosate about a month later when in a rosette stage. Late summer or fall herbicide treatments seem to be the most effective. **Consult a professional for large infestations.**

