

June Noxious Weed Spotlight: Common Mullein & Thistles (Noxious & Native)

Hello Neighbors,

Summer is almost here! After a very active May for weeds, June brings a new wave of plants that need our attention. Note, there is still time to [adopt a patch](#) and pull cheatgrass before it drops its seeds (which are out now and soon to spread). All these videos + shorts are available on our [YouTube](#) channel.

This month's focus: Mullein and Thistles — both noxious thistles to pull, and native thistles to protect.

Common Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*)

Mullein is a Colorado Noxious Weed that we have all seen here in Elk Springs. It is a deep tap-rooted biennial that grows up to 7 feet tall! It thrives in disturbed soils—roadsides, fire breaks, thinned forests, trails, and anywhere bare soil is present. It forms dense stands that crowd out native grasses and wildflowers. One plant can produce up to 180,000 seeds that stay viable for decades!

How to Identify Mullein

It produces a large, wide rosette up to 2 feet in diameter the first year. Its leaves are large, soft, and very hairy. When it shoots up in its second year, it produces yellow flowers at the top of its pinnacle and seeds that can live up to 10yrs in the soil.

We always recommend the [Pitkin County noxious weed ID directory](#) for identifying noxious weeds of all kinds. The Common Mullein page has more info on identification, what you can do, easily confused plants, and more. Currently you can see mullein growing along Elk Springs fire roads and in disturbed areas under pinyon-juniper.



- First year: look for large, fuzzy, grey-green rosette of leaves (flat to the ground). [Here's](#) video of super teeny mullein.
- Second year and beyond: 5–7 foot tall stalks with yellow flowers. Stems and leaves are covered in soft hairs—felt-like to the touch.

What Can You Do?

- Hand-pull mullein — pull the entire taproot if possible. [Here's](#) a video of our team pulling Mullein on the east fire road.
 - Bag and dispose of flowering plants — do not compost once seed heads appear.
- For large patches: spot herbicide like Roundup can be effective in early spring or fall on rosettes (but they can also be pulled very easily in damp soil).
- Re-seed with native grasses to reduce future infestations

Thistles

We have BOTH invasive, noxious thistles AND native thistles in Elk Springs. Cool, right?! The guides below will help you learn the differences between noxious and native thistles.

- [Larimer County Thistle Guide](#)
- [Colorado Noxious Weed Thistles](#)

Native Thistles to Protect

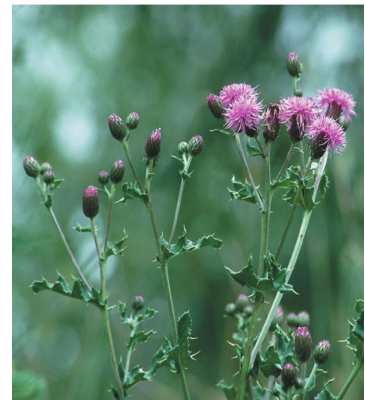
Native thistles tend to be shorter than the invasives and tend to have white or silvery leaves. For example, one of our natives, Barneby's Thistle (*Cirsium barnebyi*) is key for pollinators, butterflies, habitat diversity and soil health. These thistles are smaller than invasives, and don't aggressively colonize our landscapes. They can be seen along many of our trails.

How do you tell them apart? It takes practice! But a few general rules can help. For Barnaby's Thistle, leaves are cottony- white on both sides of the leaf, woolly and lobed. They are less 'mean looking' than Canada thistles and other noxious thistles and a fraction of the size. Here's how to ID Barneby's Thistle in Elk Springs [here](#).

In contrast, most noxious thistles aggressively invade pastures, trails, and open spaces and tend to take over. They spread rapidly, and some of them can be 5ft tall and very, very spiky. Once established, they form dense monocultures that displace native plants.

Noxious Thistles

[Canada Thistle](#) (*Cirsium arvense*) can grow to 5ft tall. They reproduce by seeds and horizontal roots. Perennial - comes back every year. Learn to ID Canada Thistle in the video [here](#). Mow or cut down any Canada thistles before they set seeds 1-3x as you see them. Since Canada thistle is a deep-rooted perennial, hand-pulling is not always effective (and can be painful).



[Musk Thistle](#) (*Carduus nutans*) and [Scotch Thistle](#) (*Onopordum acanthium*) are both biennials with purple flowers, large spiny, wavy leaves with white or yellow around the margins.

Severing the tap root below the soil surface with a shovel can effectively kill the plant- and is a healthy outlet for anger. Keep mowing or chopping when they flower again. Check out this [Musk Thistle ID video](#) and [Here](#) is a Scotch Thistle ID video.



[Plumeless Thistle](#) (*Carduus acanthoides*) are covered with numerous spiny leaves. They are narrower and wavier than Musk thistles, but with similar purple to pink flowers. [Here](#) is a Plumeless Thistle ID video:

Get your gloves on and pull these before they seed. Severing the tap root below the soil surface with a shovel can effectively kill the plant.



Good luck tackling mullein and [noxious] thistles,

The Elk Springs Noxious Weed Working Group

