

# Conservation Corner

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“All my life I have tried to pluck a thistle and plant a flower wherever the flower would grow in thought and mind.” Abraham Lincoln

Summer is here. We often welcome the sunshine and flowers but lament the rain and weeds that come with the season. In our gardens, fields, and roadsides, the summer battle against thistles has begun in earnest. Nonetheless, thistles will be this week’s plant friend – or should I say enemy.

Members of the daisy family, thistles are known for their notoriously high numbers of noxious weeds compared with most flowering plants. Thistles, of course, are covered with prickly spines, an excellent defense against browsing herbivores but also the very reason people want to destroy them. And while these spines may be nasty, they should also merit our respect and a better reputation for the thistle as one of North America’s evolutionary success stories.

Three genera of thistles are commonly found in Iowa. The *Cirsium* genera is well represented. Unfortunately, the four species that are widely distributed, the alien Canada and Bull Thistles as well as the native Tall and Field Thistles, are also destructive and invasive. One native species, Foldman’s Thistle, is found in the western counties while three species, the Wavyleaf, Swamp, and Hill’s Thistles, are neither frequent nor invasive and may even deserve protected status. The *Cardus* genera is represented by two species of musk thistles, both alien and invasive. Iowa is also home to three alien species of the *Sonchus* genera: the field, spiny, and common sowthistles. By law, all *Cirsium* and *Cardus* species as well as the field sowthistle are classified as primary noxious weeds in Iowa.

As in life, though, even our worst enemies may have some good traits. Thistle flowers are important nectar sources for pollinating insects as well as several fritillary butterflies. Many people enjoy eating their young leaves, stems, and roots in salads or as cooked vegetables. Did you know the Cherokee fletch their blowgun darts with the feathery pappus of thistle down? Or that thistle down may be used as tinder to start your campfire?

I’m sure Iowa’s state bird, the Eastern Goldfinch, considers the thistle a friend. Unlike many songbirds that nest in the spring, goldfinches wait until August when thistles are abundant and blooming. They depend on thistle seed for food, thistle pappus for nesting material, and thistle plants for protection for their new families.



On the world stage, the thistle is the national emblem of both Scotland and the Lorraine region of northeast France. You may be familiar with the Scottish legend of how thistles helped turn back a covert Norse invasion. A barefoot invader, upon stepping on a thistle in the dark, cried out in pain and alerted village defenders who defeated the enemy. In France, the village of Chardonnay, which translates “a place of thistles,” is better known for its famous green grapes used in sparkling white wines.

I’ll leave you with this thought:  
Have you plucked a thistle lately?