

2017 Weed Identification Series



Musk Thistle (Nodding Thistle)

Biennial that germinates in the spring forming a circular arrangement of leaves called a rosette. Plants remain as a rosette for the first year and produce a stem, flower, then die in the second year.

Leaves: Lobed leaves with small spines. Basal leaves are 4-12 inches long and lack any hairs. On the stem, leaves alternate and clasp the stem. Leaf surface is waxy and a spine is present at the tip of each lobe.

Stem: Typically 3-5 ft tall, but can exceed 6 ft. Stems have small leaf-like spines present except directly below each flower head.

Flower: Purple flowers 1 to 3 in wide at the end of stems, often nodding. Large, distinct bracts are present below the petals. Plants begin to bloom in late June through early August.

Similar Plants: This plant is confused with other biennial thistles. See other biennial thistle factsheets for additional information and a side-by-side comparison factsheet. Canada thistle is also similar but it is a perennial with creeping lateral roots that form dense clones. Flowers are also much smaller than other common biennial thistles. Several native thistles are also present to Wisconsin, but are not common in agricultural settings.