

## **Homestead Valley Backyard Gardening: All About Thistles**

By Kristin Desmond Ashley

Welcome back! This is the second in our article series about invasive plant species and how you as a homeowner can help the Land Trust on its mission to maintain our lands in an ecologically sound manner right from your own backyard. We encourage you to explore information from the [Homegrown National Park program](#) and register your property if you are interested. In addition, the Marin chapter of the California Native Plant Society has a wealth of information specific to our area to help you choose what to plant. They sponsor field trips to local preserves which allow you to see how our native plants grow in the wild. Your own Land Trust also sponsors wildflower walks, so keep an eye out for those announcements.

Before we move on to the plant for this month, how did it go last month? Were you able to identify echium (Pride of Madeira) on your property? Were you able to remove some or all of it? If not, don't worry, there is still time to remove plants or cut back flower stalks. The more you remove this year, the less you will have to remove next year. If you walk Pixie Trail east of the paved part, you will have noticed that our land manager and his team have pulled a great deal of echium over the last month. It might look quite stark initially, but room has been made for natives to come back in.

This month we are tackling another difficult plant: thistles. It's likely that you already don't tolerate thistles in the parts of your yard that you, your kids or your pets spend time in because they can be quite painful to touch and some grow impressively tall. But it's easy to overlook them in the wilder areas, in meadows, under trees, or next to roads, because they often hide among grasses at first. If you ignore them, they will take over quickly, and in a short time, you will have mostly thistles! The Land Trust regularly deals with thistle invasions and they are increasing with our warming climate.

Thistles are mostly annual plants that grow, set seed and die in a single season. Some are biennial, they grow in one season and set seed and die the next season. There are several species that are considered noxious weeds in our area and many more that are potential problems. All should be removed before they set flower buds to avoid further spreading.

These are the three most common invasive thistles that we find on Land Trust lands:

**ITALIAN THISTLE** *Carduus pycnocephalus*

*Photo credit: NPS*

Tall with a small tuft. Annual removal can be very successful at controlling this weed.



**MILK THISTLE** *Silybum marianum*

*Photo credit: Marabeth Grahame*

Has distinctive white veins on spiky leaves and can grow very large. Used for centuries as a medicinal plant, a flavanoid from milk thistle protects the liver from toxins including as an emergency antidote for poisoning by death cap mushrooms.



**BULL THISTLE** *Cirsium vulgare*

*Photo credit: Marabeth Grahame*

Grows tall and stalky with spiky everything and a bulbous purple tufted flower. It is the national flower of Scotland. It provides a great deal of nectar for pollinators. Of all the invasive thistles in Homestead, it is the one that is easiest to mistake for our native thistle.



Our native thistle, Clustered Thistle (*Cirsium brevistylum*) looks similar to Bull Thistle but the leaves at the ground, the basal leaves, are different.

**Clustered Thistle:**

*photo credit Calscape*



**Bull Thistle:**

*photo credit photo by Bruce Ackley via The Ohio State University, [bugwood.org](http://bugwood.org)*



Wear long protective gloves if you are going to pull young thistles by hand. Thistle buds can mature **after pulling** so you should bag and remove any plants with flower heads rather than leaving them on the ground or in a compost pile. This is why removing thistles early in the season before the buds appear is key. If you have a patch or invasion that is more mature, mowing is the best, followed by bagging of the cut biomass. Try to remove as much of the plant as possible.

A handy rule of thumb generally for invasive plant removal is that once you've done an initial treatment on an area, maintenance takes about 10% of the original effort if you are consistent. After a couple of years, you can rely on spot checking and minimal pulling.

Good to know: Homestead Valley is a Firewise Community. As part of that, any work that homeowners do on their property to clear non-natives and fire-prone plants can be used to demonstrate community participation and applied for matching grants for future work. Please send the hours and costs that you accrue for any of your plant, shrub or tree removal to [hvfirewise@homesteadvalley.org](mailto:hvfirewise@homesteadvalley.org). The hours can be your personal time spent and do not have to be hours of hired gardeners.

Thank you for reading, and we'd love to hear from you if this information is helpful and if there are other topics you'd like to know more about. Please email [info@hvl.org](mailto:info@hvl.org).