

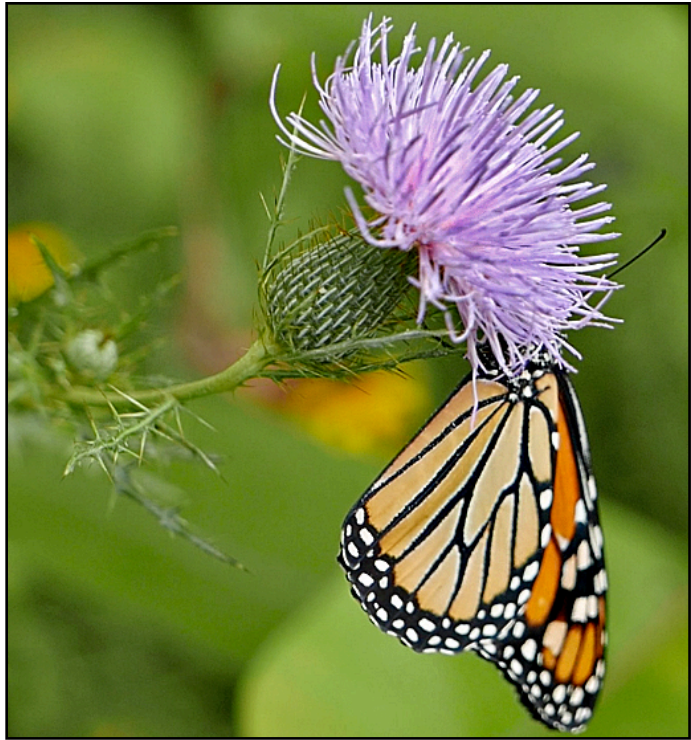
# Cirsium discolor

## Field Thistle

Tried and True  
Native Plant Selections  
for the Mid-Atlantic



Despite their importance to the ecosystem—they provide copious late summer nectar and seed to myriad winged visitors—indigenous thistles have acquired an undeserved notoriety, often mistaken for invasive, alien thistles. Native\* to meadows and forest edges mostly in the eastern half of the U.S., Field Thistle can be distinguished from the weedy, European bull thistle by the white undersides of its leaves and spineless stems.

Perennial	Flower,** Foliage (underside), Fruit
Height: 3–10 feet	
Spread: 1–2 feet	
Bloom Color: Pink to lavender, rarely white	
Characteristics	
Clump-forming <a href="#">biennial</a> or short-lived <a href="#">perennial</a>	
Basal <a href="#">rosette</a> of <a href="#">elliptic</a> , <a href="#">pinnatifid</a> leaves w/ toothed/spiny margins & white <a href="#">tomentose</a> undersides; leaves reduced & <a href="#">alternate</a> ascending hairy or <a href="#">glabrous stem</a>	
<a href="#">Corymbs</a> of 1–3+ heads of 100+ tubular <a href="#">disk florets</a> atop green, scale-like <a href="#">phyllaries</a> , each w/ center white stripe & slender <a href="#">spine</a> bloom about a month Aug–Sep	
<a href="#">Cypselae</a> with white <a href="#">pappi</a> distributed by wind	
Readily self-seeds (most fall fairly close to parent)	
Attributes	
Tolerates drought; no serious diseases or pests, although introduced weevil species can cause significant damage; <a href="#">deer</a> rarely damage	
<a href="#">Ethnobotanic</a> uses; some parts edible	
Attracts bees, butterflies, moths, hummingbirds to nectar; songbirds, especially finches, to seeds; nesting bees to dead stems cut 12–24 inches***	
Growing and Maintenance Tips	
Excellent Replacement for	
<a href="#">Soil Requirements</a> : Well-drained <a href="#">loam</a> , <a href="#">clay-loam</a>	<a href="#">Buddleia davidii</a> - Butterfly Bush
<a href="#">Light Requirements</a> : Sun, Partial Shade	<i>C. arvense</i> , <i>C. vulgare</i> - Canadian & Bull Thistles
<a href="#">Water Requirements</a> : Dry, Moist	<a href="#">Lythrum salicaria</a> - Purple Loosestrife
Flowering stems appear after one to three winters	<p>*It is <a href="#">native</a> to DC and common in DE. It is found in PA and mostly in MD's Piedmont and Coastal Plain. It is frequent throughout VA, although it has not been reported in Arlington County in NoVA.</p> <p>**A monarch butterfly feeds on nectar in September. Thistles are an important food source for monarchs migrating to Mexico.</p> <p>***Learn more about <a href="#">Garden Cleanup for Pollinators: Trim Perennial Stems in Their First Winter</a>.</p>
Lower leaves may wither in dry weather	
Use in meadows, cottage, or pollinator gardens	
<a href="#">Hardiness</a> : USDA Zones 3a–9b	

developed by Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia, serving Arlington and Alexandria

Images by Mary Free, private garden, Arlington, VA and by Elaine Mills (foliage), [Glencarlyn Library Garden](#)



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