

Thistles of Nillumbik

These spiny invaders are possibly the most recognised and disliked weeds. But how well do you know your thistles?

We have eight invasive thistle species recorded in Nillumbik and another nine species to look out for. Nillumbik has no native thistles – all are weeds.

Why are they a problem?

Thistles invade agricultural areas, horse pasture, lawns, gardens and bushland. They are more common in disturbed areas and can spread rapidly.

In pasture, agriculture and bushland, their prickles stop livestock, horses, rabbits and native animals eating them and may injure the animals if they try. Thus, they can easily take over, outcompeting the more palatable and desirable species.

Appearance

Thistles are herbs that start life as a rosette of leaves close to the ground. They then send up tall stems which carry the flowers. Leaves are often covered in hairs or spines. Flowers are mostly pink-purple and sometimes yellow or other colours.

Following is a description of the distinctive features of the thistles found in Nillumbik.

Slender Thistle (*Carduus pycnocephalus*)

Winged Slender-thistle (*Carduus tenuiflorus*)

Slender Thistles are characterised by their spiny and winged (or flared) stems and their green leaves (5–20cm), which are slender and extend in narrow, spiny wings down the stems. Flowers are pink to purple surrounded by shorter modified leaves known as bracts. Grows to 1m high.



Slender Thistle
(*Carduus pycnocephalus*)
Source: Harry Rose

Spear Thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*)

Spear Thistle also has spiny winged stems but grow taller (to 2m). It has long green leaves (to 35cm) with many small prickles on their upper surface. The feature that really distinguishes Spear Thistle is its showy purple flowers surrounded by greenish spine tipped bracts.



Spear Thistle
(*Cirsium vulgare*)
Source: Stacey Warmuth

Artichoke Thistle (*Cynara cardunculus*)

Artichoke Thistle is an emerging weed in Nillumbik and one to look out for. Not hard, with its stout form and large (to 90cm) grey-green, deeply divided leaves tipped with yellow spines. It has thick ridged stems to 2m. Flowers are blue, purple or white, surrounded by layers of large spiny bracts.

It is the only perennial thistle in Nillumbik, meaning it can flower and seed over many years.



Artichoke Thistle
(*Cynara cardunculus*)
Source: Krzysztof Ziarnik, Kenraiz

Scotch Thistle (*Onopordum acanthium*)

Scotch Thistle (also known as Heraldic Thistle) is uncommon in Nillumbik and listed as Regionally Prohibited. Landholders must make all reasonable attempts to eliminate it from their properties.

Although with bluish-grey leaves and orange-brown spines Scotch Thistle has similar colouring to Artichoke thistle, it has a different shape. Its leaves are smaller (10–35cm) and lance-shaped with spiny toothed or lobed margins. Leaves appear woolly as they are covered in a fine down. Stems are branched and with broad spiny continuous wings along their length. Flowers are reddish-purple and are surrounded by bracts with upward pointing spines. Grows to 1m.



Scotch Thistle or Heraldic Thistle
(*Onopordum acanthium*)
Source: H. Zell

Variegated Thistle (*Silybum marianum*)

The key to identifying Variegated Thistle is in its name (not its scientific name). It has variegated leaves with white veins and blotches. Rosette leaves are large (25-50cm), while stem leaves are smaller and clasp the stem. Leaves are deeply divided and have rigid spines on each lobe. The stem is heavily branched lower down, growing up to 2.5m to form solitary purple flowers surrounded by long spiny bracts. *Note: Poisonous to livestock, especially when wilted.*



Variegated Thistle
(*Silybum marianum*)
Source: Fir0002

Common Sow-thistle (*Sonchus oleraceus*) Rough Sow-thistle (*Sonchus asper*)

Sowthistles are the least robust thistle in Nillumbik with hollow stems (20cm–1.4m) that produce a milky sap. The flowers are smaller and yellow. They have green leaves (6–35cm). Rough Sow-thistle has spiny lobed leaves. Common Sow-thistle is the only non-spiny thistle in this guide and has

thin lance-shaped leaves that are sometimes lobed. Although they can cause a problem, they are a lower threat than the other thistles in Nillumbik.



Rough Sow-thistle
(*Sonchus asper*)
Source: Stacey Warmuth

Watch List

There are many thistle species that haven't been in recorded in Nillumbik – yet. The real nasties to look out for are: Nodding Thistle (*Carduus nutans*), Soldier Thistle (*Picnomon acarna*) and Saffron Thistle (*Carthamus lanatus*). Contact Council if you see these weeds.

Your responsibly

Most thistles in this guide (except the Sow-Thistles) are listed as noxious in Victoria. This means landholders are responsible for controlling them on their land.

Control

The good news is you don't need specialised equipment to control thistles. Remove thistles with a mattock or hoe at any growth stage, making sure to remove as much of the root system as possible.

Or spot spray or dab thistles with herbicide. Treat in Spring or Summer when the thistle is actively growing but still in its rosette stage.

Most thistles grow from seed, flower and set seed within one to two years and then die. Control before they complete this cycle to reduce seed in the soil and break the seedbank.

Seeds spread by wind, on animals, by ants and in contaminated soil or hay. Keep an eye out for emerging plants. Avoid disturbance and maintain healthy bushland and robust pasture to prevent thistles establishing. And work with your neighbours to control thistles across your area.

Council can provide further advice and support to manage thistles on your property.
Call **9433 3111** or email
environment@nillumbik.vic.gov.au