

Cirsium palustre, *European Swamp Thistle* By: David Gumbart, The Nature Conservancy

Much of the information on this page is taken from the *Invasive Plant Atlas of New England (IPANE)* web page. For information on this and other invasive plant species, visit IPANE at: <http://nbii-nin.ciesin.columbia.edu/ipane/>

As its name implies, *Cirsium palustre* is native to Europe, where it is very common in damp ground including marshes, roadsides, pastures, gardens and disturbed areas. In the United States, it is currently known in New York, Massachusetts and New Hampshire in the northeast, and Michigan and Wisconsin in the upper mid-west. Becoming familiar with this plant will aid in the early detection of this species, should it arrive in Connecticut, and ensure a rapid response for control before it can become an established species.

Identification:

(source: http://dnr.wi.gov/invasives/fact/thistle_EMarsh.htm)

Cirsium palustre is a member of the Aster family. An herbaceous biennial, it grows 4 to 5 feet tall, primarily in moist areas. Leaves in first-year rosettes are spiny, long, deeply lobed and hairy on the underside. On flowering plants, leaves are 6 to 8 inches long near the base and shorter toward the top. Flowering stems are erect, thick, sometimes reddish in color, branched at the top and bristling with spiny "wings" aligned with the stem. Clusters of spiny purple flower heads bloom in June and July and by late summer produce tiny seeds attached to feathery "thistle-down."

History:

It is not exactly clear when and how *Cirsium palustre* got to New England. The earliest record in New England seems to be from East Andover, New Hampshire in 1902. The botanist who located this population of the plant in a "moist forest tangle" some 20 acres in size, couldn't figure out how it had gotten there, as it was more than a mile from any town or cultivation. Other early records come from South Boston (1908) and Newfoundland (1910). Though it is not clear how it arrived, it has slowly spread west and, to a lesser degree, south.

Habitats in New England:

Open fields (agricultural, grassland, disturbed area, lawn)
Coastal Beach or Dune
Forest (early and late successional, floodplain)
Wetland (herbaceous, shrubby, wet meadow)
Roadside

Cirsium palustre grows best in moist acidic soils. It is common on roadsides and in wet ditches. It is somewhat shade tolerant, and therefore can be found in moist woods.



USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database / Britton, N.L., and A. Brown. 1913. *Illustrated flora of the northern states and Canada*. Vol. 3: 554.

Above: copyright free

For **color photos** of *Cirsium palustre*, please visit these sites:

- http://dnr.wi.gov/invasives/fact/thistle_EMarsh.htm
- http://www.uwgb.edu/BIODIVERSITY/herbarium/invasive_species/cirpal01.htm

Similar species:

The native Marsh Thistle (*Cirsium muticum*) has non-spiny stems and flower heads. Other common invasive thistles include Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*) which has spiny leaves but non-spiny stems and flower heads. Bull thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*) and Plumeless thistle (*Carduus acanthoides*) which have sharply spined leaves, stems and flower heads.

Prevention/management:

Mechanical: Repeated mowing or selective cutting close to the ground can reduce an infestation within three or four years. The rosettes can be hand-pulled or dug. Flowering heads can be cut off while in the unopened bud stage. If cut during or after flowering, flower heads should be gathered and destroyed.

Chemical: Clopyralid or metsulfuron-methyl may be used as foliage sprays. 1 to 2% active ingredient solution of glyphosate can also be used during the stage when plants are 6 to 10 inches tall, during the bud to flowering stage, or when applied to rosettes in the fall. If plants are near open water, use only herbicides approved for such use.