Northern California is thistle rich—more than 40 kinds of thistles live in Shasta, Trinity, and Siskiyou counties. Half of these thistles are the ones we know best as weeds that show up unwanted, their seeds wafting in on the wind or in our tires, and making themselves right at home with hundreds or thousands of seedlings.

But the other half are native thistles. Some are quite beautiful and well behaved. All are tremendously important sources of nectar for butterflies, bees, and some for hummingbirds. If you want to draw pollinators into your garden, think about planting thistles.

Cobwebby or snowy thistle (Cirsium occidentale) is widespread in the foothills and mountains of California, though not plentiful at any one spot, occurring singly or in small groups. Look for it in forest openings and on roadsides. Cobwebby thistle especially favors sloping rocky roadcuts. These are 55 mph plants—tall white-woolly plants with big scarlet flower heads that turn your head while you’re driving by.

Rose thistle (Cirsium andersonii), while more petite overall than cobwebby thistle, still has large, colorful flower heads. Try either of these in a well drained corner in full sun or partial shade.

For a damp spot, Brewer’s swamp thistle (Cirsium douglasii var. breweri) is a native of wet mountain meadows. Its foliage is silver, and unlike the few large heads of cobwebby and rose thistles, this one

Native Thistles are good for pollinators, good for gardens

by Julie Kierstead Nelson

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has many smaller pink to lavender heads. When I first came to California in the late 1980s, I was alarmed to see how many mountain meadows were infested with weedy thistles. As it turned out, they were these swamp thistles and they belonged right where they were; it was my perception that was wrong.

All three of these plants are in the sunflower family, which means that each flower head is packed with many individual flowers that sit on a common platform called a receptacle, and the flowers are collectively surrounded and protected by a spiny involucre. Each flower produces a single dry fruit, like a sunflower seed on a sunflower head. These are food much loved by goldfinches. Each seed is topped by a fluffy tuft of hairs for dispersal of uneaten seeds by any passing breeze.

Cobwebby thistle is sometimes available from native plant society sales or native plant nurseries, and seeds are sold online. To collect and grow your own seed, wear gloves and extract the seeds with tweezers. Seeds can be planted directly or soaked overnight and

Typical roadside habitat for cobwebby thistle. Photo by Julie Kierstead Nelson.

Brewer’s swamp thistle in its mountain meadow habitat. Photo by Julie Kierstead Nelson.

Many tubular scarlet flowers are packed tightly in a single cobwebby thistle head. Photo by Julie Kierstead Nelson.
given a cold period in the refrigerator—not the freezer—for several weeks to two months before planting outside. Native thistles, like most taprooted plants, don’t transplant well, so resist the temptation to dig them up from their native homes.

If you plant thistles, you will be well rewarded with beautiful plants; a succession of bees, butterflies, and birds; and the happy feeling of having done something good for the web of life that sustains us all.

Heads of swamp thistle are smaller, clustered, and pinched in the middle. Photo by Julie Kierstead Nelson.