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Italian Thistle

Carduus pycnocephalus

HABITAT

Italian thistle grows in wildland areas and meadows, usually where the soil has been disturbed. It thrives in the warm dry climate of the Livermore Valley.

FACTS

The leaves of this thistle are silvery green on top and woolly-white underneath, with a wicked sharp spine at the tip. Its stems are also covered with tiny, prickly hair-like spines. It grows from eight inches to six and a half feet. When flowering, it produces clusters of small light pink or light purple flowers of three to five per cluster.

Native to southern Europe and North Africa, this plant has become a widespread pest. It was accidentally brought into the United States and to California in the 1930s.



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Poison hemlock

Conium maculatum

HABITAT

You might find this infamous plant growing in dense patches in riparian areas or also in meadows and on the shady slopes of the hillsides.

FACTS

Poison hemlock is a member of the carrot family, but is best known for its toxicity to vertebrates, especially its leaves and seeds. It grows from two to ten feet tall, and only reproduces by seed.

Native to Europe, North Africa and Asia, this ferny biennial with its clusters of white flowers was first brought into the United States as a garden plant in the 1880s and sold as a "winter fern." Only later did scientists and botanists know to warn citizens of the dangerous toxicity of this plant which leads to accidental sickness or death, and also to recommend prompt and effective treatments.



Livermore Area
Recreation & Park District
An independent special district
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PLANT INVADERS

Nonnative plants can be troublesome in many ways. They might be prickly, rash-inducing, or downright poisonous. Some can fuel wildfires and crowd out native plants. They can alter habitats to the detriment of native animal species which depend on them. Look for these troublemakers while you explore our regional parks and preserves.



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Milk Thistle

Silybum marianum

HABITAT

Milk thistle is very easy to identify with its white-veined leaves. It is a low-growing invader, two to three feet in height, which prefers moist places in fields and meadows. It bears one purple flower on each long spiny stem.

FACTS

Although it is poisonous to cattle and sheep, milk thistle's biggest problem for people is its spines. It is rumored to have medicinal benefits for humans, but this has not been verified. This plant is native to Europe and Asia.



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Bindweed

Convolvulus arvensis

HABITAT

Annoyingly persistent, this little weed rambles along roadsides, beside arroyos and lakes, in open meadows, and even in your yard. It flourishes in the poorest of soils, and requires a bare minimum of moisture to grow, flower, and survive extreme temperatures.

FACTS

This invader is a European native. Bindweed's flower resembles a morning glory or a petunia flower with its shape and light pink, lavender or white color. Depending on the moisture in the soil, its flowers can be small or large. The plant is low-growing, usually less than six inches tall, but its stems can reach six feet long.

Because it is a very deep-rooted perennial, bindweed is extremely difficult to dig out. It can grow back from a partially damaged root, and in our dry climate, that root grows deeper and deeper, until it is out of reach.



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Medusa Head

Tarnithemon caput-medusae

HABITAT

Medusa head invades grassy places, oak woodlands, roadsides, and vacant lots, requiring no special climate and needing only ten inches of rainfall annually.

FACTS

You can recognize this annual grass because it looks green when other plants surrounding it have turned brown in the heat of summer. At maturity it can grow to 24 inches high. Not only does it outcompete our natives by stealing nutrients and moisture from the soil, but it is self-pollinating and widespread, supplying extra dry fuel for wildfires.

Medusa head is native to Spain, Portugal, France, Morocco and Algeria.



Yellow Starthistle

Centaurea solstitialis

HABITAT

You will find this painfully spiny plant in open sunny areas. It requires a moderate amount of moisture to grow and produce its seeds.

FACTS

Yellow starthistle is an annual that may grow to be 6 inches up to six feet in height. Its many flowers bloom between May and December. It is native to southern Europe and Western Asia.

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Purple Starthistle

Centaurea calcitropa

HABITAT

Although usually an annual, this starthistle may survive a mild winter. It is also very spiny and prefers open sunny places, just like the yellow variety.

FACTS

Purple starthistle may grow to be 12 inches up to 4 feet tall in height. Its flowers bloom from May until December.

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