

Blessed Thistle

MEDICINAL: Blessed Thistle is used to strengthen the heart, and is useful in all remedies for lung, kidney, and liver problems. It is also used as a brain food for stimulating the memory. It is used in remedies for menopause and for menstrual cramping. Often used by lactating women to stimulate blood flow to the mammary glands and increase the flow of milk.

GROWING: Blessed Thistle is generally found along roadsides and in wastelands. It is an annual, and reaches to 2 feet tall. Most folks consider this a pesky weed, so cultivation is not common. Try gathering some for yourself from the wild, if you dare the stickers - buying commercial is best!

Also known as

Cnicus benedictus, Carbenia benedicta, Cardo Santo, Carduus, Carduus benedictus, Cnici Benedicti Herba, Cnicus, Holy Thistle, Spotted Thistle, St. Benedict Thistle.

Introduction

The blessed thistle is a weed with prickly leaves and yellow flowers surrounded by purple spikes. It is indigenous to the Mediterranean, and was originally used in Ayurvedic medicine in India and Bhutan. The plant was then introduced to Europe in the 1500's and mainly cultivated in monasteries by monks where it gained the title "blessed" (benedictus) for its use in treating the black plague. It was noted as a type of panacea in herbal texts of the period primarily due to its use during the plague.

Constituents

Bitter principles, primarily cnicin.

Parts Used

Dried leaves, stems, and flowers.

Typical Preparations

As a tea infusion, in capsules or as an extract, or externally as a poultice for boils and wounds.

Summary

Modern herbal applications of blessed thistle are based on a long history of use in Europe and in Indian Ayurvedic medicine. Blessed Thistle is used to treat digestive ailments fundamentally caused by insufficient secretion of stomach acid. The herb's bitter taste triggers a reflex reaction that releases gastric juices into the stomach, especially those needed to digest fats. For this reason, modern herbalists agree that the plant is helpful for loss of appetite, upset stomach, and gas, although it may be better to take the herb before these symptoms occur (such as before eating a fatty meal), rather than after. The herb is also antibacterial.

Precautions

Generally not recommended during pregnancy. If you are allergic to artichokes, avoid this herb.

THISTLE, HOLY

Botanical: *Carbenia benedicta* (BERUL.)

Family: N.O. Compositae

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---**Synonyms**---Blessed Thistle. Cnicus benedictus (Gaetn.). Carduus benedictus (Steud.).

---**Part Used**---Herb.

A Thistle, however, that has been cultivated for several centuries in this country for its medicinal use is known as the Blessed or Holy Thistle. It is a handsome annual, a native of Southern Europe, occurring there in waste, stony, uncultivated places, but it grows more readily in England in cultivation.

It is said to have obtained its name from its high reputation as a heal-all, being supposed even to cure the plague. It is mentioned in all the treatises on the Plague, and especially by Thomas Brasbridge, who in 1578 published his *Poore Man's Jewell, that is to say, a Treatise of the Pestilence, unto which is annexed a declaration of the vertues of the Hearbes Carduus Benedictus and Angelica*. Shakespeare in *Much Ado about Nothing*, says: 'Get you some of this distilled Carduus Benedictus and lay it to your heart; it is the only thing for a qualm.... I mean plain Holy Thistle.' The 'distilled' leaves, it says 'helpeth the hart,' 'expelleth all poyson taken in at the mouth and other corruption that doth hurt and annoy the hart,' and 'the juice of it is outwardly applied to the bodie' ('lay it to your heart,' *Sh.*), 'therefore I counsell all that have Gardens to nourish it, that they may have it always to their own use, and the use of their neighbours that lacke it.'

It has sometimes been stated that the herb was first cultivated by Gerard in 1597, but as this book was published twenty years previously it would appear to have been in cultivation much earlier, and in fact it is described and its virtues enumerated in the *Herbal* of Turner in 1568.

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---**Description**---The stem of the Blessed Thistle grows about 2 feet high, is reddish, slender, very much branched and scarcely able to keep upright under the weight of its leaves and flowerheads. The leaves are long, narrow, clasping the dull green stem, with prominent pale veins, the irregular teeth of the wavy margin ending in spines. The flowers are pale yellow, in green prickly heads, each scale of the involucre, or covering of the head, ending also in a long, brown bristle. The whole plant, leaves, stalks and also the flowerheads, are covered with a thin down. It grows more compactly in some soils than in others.

---**Cultivation**---Being an annual, Blessed Thistle is propagated by seed. It thrives in any ordinary soil. Allow 2 feet each way when thinning out the seedlings. Though occurring sometimes in waste places in England as an escape from cultivation, it cannot be considered indigenous to this country. The seeds are usually sown in spring, but if the newly-ripened seeds are sown in September or October in sheltered situations, it is possible to have supplies of the herb green, both summer and winter.

---**Part Used**---The whole herb. The leaves and flowering tops are collected in July, just as the plant breaks into flower, and cut on a dry day, the best time being about noon, when there is no longer any trace of dew on them.

About 3 1/2 tons of fresh herb produce 1 ton when dried, and about 35 cwt. of dry herb can be raised per acre.

---**Chemical Constituents**---Blessed Thistle contains a volatile oil, and a bitter, crystalline neutral body called Cnicin (soluble in alcohol and slightly also in water) which is said to be analogous to salicin in its properties.

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---**Medicinal Action and Uses**---Tonic, stimulant, diaphoretic, emetic and emmenagogue. In large doses, Blessed Thistle acts as a strong emetic, producing vomiting with little pain and inconvenience. Cold infusions in smaller draughts are valuable in weak and debilitated conditions of the stomach, and as a tonic, creating appetite and preventing sickness. The warm infusion - 1 OZ. of the dried herb to a pint of boiling water - in doses of a wineglassful, forms in intermittent fevers one of the most useful diaphoretics to which employment can be given. The plant was at one time supposed to possess very great virtues against fevers of all kinds.

Fluid extract, 1/2 to 1 drachm.

It is said to have great power in the purification and circulation of the blood, and on this account strengthens the brain and the memory.

The leaves, dried and powdered, are good for worms.

It is chiefly used now for nursing mothers the warm infusion scarcely ever failing to procure a proper supply of milk. It is considered one of the best medicines which can be used for the purpose.

Turner (1568) says:

'It is very good for the headache and the megram, for the use of the juice or powder of the leaves, preserveth and keepeth a man from the headache, and healeth it being present. It is good for any ache in the body and strengtheneth the members of the whole body, and fasteneth loose sinews and weak. It is also good for the dropsy. It helpeth the memory and amendeth thick hearing. The leaves provoke sweat. There is nothing better for the canker and old rotten and festering sores than the leaves, juice, broth, powder and water of Carduus benedictus.'

Culpepper (1652) writes of it:

'It is a herb of Mars, and under the Sign Aries. It helps swimnings and giddiness in the head, or the disease called vertigo, because Aries is the House of Mars. It is an excellent remedy against yellow jaundice and other infirmities of the gall, because Mars governs choller. It strengthens the attractive faculty in man, and clarifies the blood, because the one is ruled by Mars. The continual drinking the decoction of it helps red faces, tetters and ringworm, because Mars causeth them. It helps plague-sores,

boils and itch, the bitings of mad dogs and venomous beasts, all which infirmities are under Mars. Thus you see what it doth by sympathy.

'By Antypathy to other Planets: it cures the French Pox by Antypathy to Venus who governs it. It strengthens the memory and cures deafness by Antypathy to Saturn, who hath his fall in Aries which Rules the Head. It cures Quarten Agues and other diseases of Melancholy, and a dust Choller by Sympathy to Saturn, Mars being exalted in Capricorn. Also it provokes Urine, the stopping of which is usually caused by Mars or the Moon.'

Mattheolus and Fuschius wrote also of *Carduus benedictus*:

'It is a plant of great virtue; it helpeth inwardly and outwardly; it strengthens all the principal members of the body, as the brain, the heart, the stomach, the liver, the lungs and the kidney; it is also a preservative against all disease, for it causes perspiration, by which the body is purged of much corruption, such as breedeth diseases; it expelleth the venom of infection; it consumes and wastes away all bad humours; therefore, give God thanks for his goodness, Who hath given this herb and all others for the benefit of our health.'

Four different ways of using Blessed Thistle have been recommended: It may be eaten in the green leaf, with bread and butter for breakfast, like Watercress; the dried leaves may be made into a powder and a drachm taken in wine or otherwise every day; a wineglassful of the juice may be taken every day, or, which is the usual and the best method, an infusion may be made of the dried herb, taken any time as a preventive, or when intended to remove disease, at bed time, as it causes copious perspiration.

Many of the other Thistles may be used as substitutes for the Blessed Thistle. The seeds of the Milk Thistle (*Carduus Marianus*), known also as *Silybum Marianum*, have similar properties and uses, and the Cotton Thistle, Melancholy Thistle, etc., have also been employed for like purposes.