

Milk Thistle (*Carduus marianus*)
Common Name: Mary thistle.

Location: This herb originates in Europe.

Description: The seeds of milk thistle are used medicinally.

Properties: Milk thistle is well known for its use in treating a multitude of ailments.

Uses: Use milk thistle to treat acne, Crohn's disease, constipation, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), alcoholism, hepatitis, cirrhosis, gallstones, atherosclerosis, high cholesterol, too much iron collection, cancer, diabetes, seizure disorders, ovarian cysts, psoriasis, and Parkinson's disease.

Doses: This herb can be found as silymarin-gel capsules, seeds, tinctures and teas.

Warnings: Some side effects of milk thistle include diarrhea. If you are taking contraceptives while using milk thistle, the contraceptives may become less effective at preventing pregnancy.

Milk Thistle Seed and Powder Profile

Also known as

Silybum marianum, Holy Thistle, Variegated Thistle, Lady's Thistle.

Introduction

Milk thistle is a member of the sunflower family native to a narrow area of the Mediterranean, but grown for centuries throughout Europe and now a common weed in California. Milk thistle was probably brought to North America as a coffee substitute, but its shiny black seeds covered with feathery tufts have a far longer history in herbal medicine. The edible thistles were given the name *silybum* by Dioscorides, a Greek physician who served in the Roman Army over 1,900 years ago. The thistle with white mottling on its leaves became known as the "milk" thistle. This herb served as a therapy for conditions we would now recognize as ascites, congestive heart failure, various kidney diseases, and hepatitis. In Catholic Germany, its usefulness was said to be second only to calling on Mother Mary, and the white mottling on the leaf said to be the touch of the Virgin Mary's milk, hence the species name "*marianum*." In the twentieth century, German physicians and pharmacologists found that milk thistle could treat certain mushroom poisoning, fatty liver due to alcoholism, cirrhosis, and hepatitis B and C. Much of the research involved a proprietary formula developed by the German natural products maker Madaus, but the authoritative Complete German Commission E Monographs also recognized the usefulness of the whole herb.

Constituents

Silymarin (silibinin, silydianin, and silychristin), vitamin E (tocopherols), and about 90% fatty acids.

Parts Used

The threshed, dried seed.

Typical Preparations

Whole seeds or seed powder, encapsulated or used to make an infusion. The most convenient form has been either an alcohol or glycerin extract.

Summary

There is a tendency among herbalists to think of milk thistle seed and silymarin as synonymous. For instance, The Expanded German Commission E Monographs notes the historical uses of the whole herb for treating "Congestion of the liver, spleen, and kidneys" and in the very next paragraph states, "Milk thistle is an example of a preparation that is required to be in the standardized, concentrated form in order to fully convey the desired, in this case, hepatoprotectant, effects." This isn't necessarily so. There's no doubt that silymarin extract delivers more silymarin than the same amount of milk thistle. This is because only about 10% of the silymarin in the seed can be absorbed by the digestive tract, and the seed is only up to 3% silymarin. However, since the customary dose of the whole herb is 12 to 15 grams (up to 3% silymarin) and the customary daily dose of silymarin extract amounts to 200 to 400 milligrams of silymarin, you actually get an effective dose of silymarin by taking whole milk thistle seed three times a day. There are other reasons to use the milk thistle seed (whole or ground) rather than silymarin extract. Even when an herb is used to treat a serious health condition, the whole herb often has a more balanced effect. The milk thistle extract silymarin, for instance, has proven usefulness in treating liver disease. The drawback to using silymarin is that, if the doctor prescribes other drugs, such as steroids, silymarin can interfere with the liver's ability to detoxify them. Milk thistle seed has the same healing effect on the liver without interfering with the organ's ability to detoxify drugs or environmental chemicals, and a side benefit of normalizing blood lipids as the liver heals.

Precautions

Like silymarin extract, milk thistle seed can cause mild diarrhea by stimulating the release of bile. This effect is most notable if there is a high-fat diet.

Thistle is the old English name - essentially the same in all kindred languages - for a large family of plants occurring chiefly in Europe and Asia, of which we have fourteen species in Great Britain, arranged under the botanical groups *Carduus*, *Carlina*, *Onopordon* and *Carbenia*, or *Cnicus*.

In agriculture the Thistle is the recognized sign of untidiness and neglect, being found not so much in barren ground, as in good ground not properly cared for. It has always been a plant of ill repute among us; Shakespeare classes 'rough Thistles' with 'hateful Docks,' and further back in the history of our race we read of the Thistle representing part of the primeval curse on the earth in general, and on man in particular, for - 'Thorns also and Thistles shall it bring forth to thee.'

Thistles will soon monopolize a large extent of country to the extinction of other plants, as they have done in parts of the American prairies, in Canada and British Columbia, and as they did in Australia, till a stringent Act of Parliament was passed, about twenty years ago, imposing heavy penalties upon all who neglected to destroy Thistles on their land, every man being now compelled to root out, within fourteen days, any Thistle that may lift up its head, Government inspectors being specially appointed to carry out the enforcement of the law.

The growth of weeds in Great Britain, having, in the opinion of many, also reached disturbing proportions, it is now proposed to enact a similar law in this country, and the Smallholders' Union is bringing forward a 'Bill to prevent the spread of noxious weeds in England and Wales,' the provisions being similar to the Australian law - weed-infested roadsides, as well as badly-cleared cultivated land, to come within the scope of the enactment.

Among the thirteen noxious weeds enumerated in the proposed Bill, the name of Thistle is naturally to be found. And yet in medicine Thistles are far from useless.

When beaten up or crushed in a mill to destroy the prickles, the leaves of all Thistles have proved excellent food for cattle and horses. This kind of fodder was formerly used to a great extent in Scotland before the introduction of special green crops for the purpose. The young stems of many of the Thistles are also edible, and the seeds of all the species yield a good oil by expression.

Two or three of our native species are handsome enough to be worthy of a place in gardens. Some species which flourish in hotter and drier climates than our own, such as the handsome Yellow Thistles of the south of Europe, *Scolymus*, are cultivated for that purpose, and have a classical interest, being mentioned by Hesiod as *the* flower of summer. This striking plant, crowned with its golden flowers, is abundant throughout Sicily. The Fish-bone Thistle (*Chamaepeuce diacantha*), from Syria, is also a very handsome plant. A grand Scarlet Thistle from Mexico (*Erythrolena conspicua*) was grown in England some fifty years ago, but is now never seen.

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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 swimings 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, tetter 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.

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THISTLE, MILK

Botanical: *Silybum marianum*

Family: N.O. Compositae

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---**Synonym**---Marian Thistle.

---**Parts Used**---Whole herb, root, leaves, seeds and hull.

The Marian, or Milk Thistle, is perhaps the most important medicinally among the members of this genus, to which all botanists do not, however, assign it, naming it *Silybum Marianum*.

---**Description**---It is a fine, tall plant, about the size of the Cotton Thistle, with cut into root-leaves, waved and spiny at the margin, of a deep, glossy green, with milkwhite veins, and is found not uncommonly in hedgebanks and on waste ground, especially by buildings, which causes some authorities to consider that it may not be a true native. In Scotland it is rare.

This handsome plant is not unworthy of a place in our gardens and shrubberies and was formerly frequently cultivated. The stalks, like those of most of our larger Thistles, may be eaten, and are palatable and nutritious. The leaves also may be eaten as a salad when young. Bryant, in his *Flora Dietetica*, writes of it: 'The young shoots in the spring, cut close to the root with part of the stalk on, is one of the best boiling salads that is eaten, and surpasses the finest cabbage. They were sometimes baked in pies. The roots may be eaten like those of Salsify.' In some districts the leaves are called 'Pig Leaves,' probably because pigs like them, and the seeds are a favourite food of goldfinches.

The common statement that this bird lines its nest with thistledown is scarcely accurate, the substance being in most cases the down of Colt's-foot (*Tussilago*), or the cotton down from the willow, both of which are procurable at the building season, whereas thistledown is at that time immature.

Westmacott, writing in 1694, says of this Thistle: 'It is a Friend to the Liver and Blood: the prickles cut off, they were formerly used to be boiled in the Spring and eaten with other herbs; but as the World decays, so doth the Use of good old things and others more delicate and less virtuous brought in.'

The heads of this Thistle formerly were eaten, boiled, treated like those of the Artichoke.

There is a tradition that the milk-white veins of the leaves originated in the milk of the Virgin which once fell upon a plant of Thistle, hence it was called Our Lady's Thistle, and the Latin name of the species has the same derivation.

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---**Medicinal Action and Uses**---The seeds of this plant are used nowadays for the same purpose as Blessed Thistle, and on this point John Evelyn wrote: 'Disarmed of its prickles and boiled, it is worthy of esteem, and thought to be a great breeder of milk and proper diet for women who are nurses.'

It is in popular use in Germany for curing jaundice and kindred biliary derangements. It also acts as a demulcent in catarrh and pleurisy. The decoction when applied externally is said to have proved beneficial in cases of cancer.

Gerard wrote of the Milk Thistle that:

'the root if borne about one doth expel melancholy and remove all diseases connected

therewith. . . . My opinion is that this is the best remedy that grows against all melancholy diseases,'

which was another way of saying that it had good action on the liver. He also tells us:

'Dioscorides affirmed that the seeds being drunke are a remedy for infants that have their sinews drawn together, and for those that be bitten of serpents:'

and we find in a record of old Saxon remedies that 'this wort if hung upon a man's neck it setteth snakes to flight.' The seeds were also formerly thought to cure hydrophobia.

Culpepper considered the Milk Thistle to be as efficient as *Carduus benedictus* for agues, and preventing and curing the infection of the plague, and also for removal of obstructions of the liver and spleen. He recommends the infusion of the fresh root and seeds, not only as good against jaundice, also for breaking and expelling stone and being good for dropsy when taken internally, but in addition, to be applied externally, with cloths, to the liver. With other writers, he recommends the young, tender plant (after removing the prickles) to be boiled and eaten in the spring as a blood cleanser.

A tincture is prepared by homoeopathists for medicinal use from equal parts of the root and the seeds with the hull attached.

It is said that the empirical nostrum, *antiglaireux*, of Count Mattaei, is prepared from this species of Thistle.

Thistles in general, according to Culpepper, are under the dominion of Jupiter.

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THISTLE, SCOTCH

Botanical: Onopordon acanthium

Family: N.O. Compositae

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---**Synonyms**---Cotton Thistle. Woolly Thistle.

---**Parts Used**---Leaves, root.

The Scotch Thistle, or Cotton Thistle (*Onopordon Acanthium*) is one of the most beautiful of British plants, not uncommon in England, by roadsides and in waste places, particularly in chalky and sandy soils in the southern counties.

---**Description**---It is a biennial, flowering in late summer and autumn. The erect stem, 18 inches to 5 feet high, is very stout and much branched, furnished with wing-like appendages (the decurrent bases of the leaves) which are broader than its own diameter. The leaves are very large, waved and with sharp prickles on the margin. The flowers are light purple and surrounded with a nearly globular involucre, with scales terminating in strong, yellow spines.

The whole plant is hoary with a white, cottony down, that comes off readily when rubbed, and causes the young leaves to be quite white. From the presence of this covering, the Thistle has obtained its popular name of Cotton or Woolly Thistle.

This species is one of the stiffest and most thorny of its race, and its sharp spines well agree with Gerard's description of the plant as 'set full of most horrible sharp prickles, so that it is impossible for man or beast to touch the same without great hurt and danger.'

Which is the true Scotch Thistle even the Scottish antiquarians cannot decide, but it is generally considered to be this species of Thistle that was originally the badge of the House of Stuart, and came to be regarded as the national emblem of Scotland. The first heraldic use of the plant would appear to be in the inventory of the property of James III of Scotland, made at his death in 1458, where a hanging embroidered with 'thrissils' is mentioned. It was, undoubtedly, a national badge in 1503, in which year Dunbar wrote his poetic allegory, 'The Thrissill and the Rose,' on the union of James IV and Princess Margaret of England. The Order of the Thistle, which claims, with the exception of the Garter, to be the most ancient of our Orders, was instituted in 1540 by James V, and revived by James VII of Scotland and Second of England, who created eight Knights in 1687. The expressive motto of the Order, *Nemo me impune lacessit* (which would seem to apply most aptly to the species just described), appears surrounding the Thistle that occupies the centre of the coinage of James VI. From that date until now, the Thistle has had a place on our coins.

Pliny states, and mediaeval writers repeat, that a decoction of Thistles applied to a bald head would restore a healthy growth of hair.

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---Medicinal Action and Uses---The Ancients supposed this Thistle to be a specific in cancerous complaints, and in more modern times the juice is said to have been applied with good effect to cancers and ulcers.

A decoction of the root is astringent and diminishes discharges from mucous membranes.

Gerard tells us, on the authority of Dioscorides and Pliny, that 'the leaves and root hereof are a remedy for those that have their bodies drawn backwards,' and Culpepper explains that not only is the juice therefore good for a crick in the neck, but also as a remedy for rickets in children. It was considered also to be good in nervous complaints.

The name of the genus is derived from the Greek words *onos* (an ass) and *perdon* (I disperse wind), the species being said to produce this effect in asses.

The juicy receptacle or disk on which the florets are placed was used in earlier times as the Artichoke - which is also a member of the Thistle tribe. The young stalks, when stripped of their rind, may be eaten like those of the Burdock.

The cotton is occasionally collected from the stem and used to stuff pillows, and the oil obtained from the seeds has been used on the Continent for burning, both in lamps and for ordinary culinary purposes. Twelve pounds of the seeds are said to produce, when heat is used in expression, about 3 lb of oil.

The greater number of the Thistles are assigned to the genus *Carduus*. The derivation of the name of this genus is difficult to determine; by some orders it is said to come from the Greek *cheuro*, a technical word denoting the operation of carding wool, to which process the heads of some of the species are applicable.

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THISTLE, DWARF

Botanical: *Carduus acaulis*

Family: N.O. Compositae

---**Synonyms**---Ground Thistle. Dwarf May Thistle (Culpepper).

---**Part Used**---Root.

Carduus acaulis, the Dwarf Thistle, is found in pastures, especially chalk downs, and is rather common in the southern half of England, particularly on the east side. It is a perennial, with a long, woody root-stock. The stem in the ordinary form is so short that the flowers appear to be sessile, or sitting, in the centre of the rosette of prickly leaves, but very occasionally it attains the length of a foot or 18 inches, and then is usually slightly branched. The leaves are spiny and rigid, with only a few hairs on the upper side, and on the veins beneath, and are of a dark, shining green. The flowers are large and dark crimson in colour, and are in bloom from July to September.

The Thistle is very injurious in pastures; it kills all plants that grow beneath it, and ought not to be tolerated, even on the borders of fields and waste places. At one time the root used to be chewed as a remedy for toothache.

Johns (*Flowers of the Field*) calls this the Ground Thistle, and Culpepper calls it the Dwarf May Thistle, and says that 'in some places it is called the Dwarf Carline Thistle.'

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THISTLE, CREEPING PLUME

Botanical: *Carduus arvensis*

Family: N.O. Compositae

---**Synonym**---Way Thistle.

---**Parts Used**---Root, leaves.

Carduus arvensis, the Creeping Plume Thistle, or Way Thistle, has many varieties. It is found in cultivated fields and waste places, and is very common and widely distributed. The root-stock is perennial, creeping extensively and sending up leafy barren shoots and flowering stems about 3 feet high. The leaves are attenuated, embracing the stems at their base, with strong spines at their margins. The flowers are in numerous small heads, and are pale purple in colour. The plant is bright green, the leaves often white beneath, but varying much in this respect.

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THISTLE, WELTED

Botanical: *Carduus crispus*

Family: N.O. Compositae

---**Synonym**---Field Thistle.

---**Parts Used**---Root, leaves.

Carduus crispus, the Welled Thistle, or Field Thistle, is one of the taller species. The stem, 3 to 4 feet high, is erect, branched, continuously spinous-winged throughout. The leaves are green on both sides, downy on the veins beneath, narrow, cut into numerous lobes and very prickly. The flowers are purplish-crimson, not very large, sometimes clustered three or four together on short stalks. The plant varies much in the degree of soft hairiness, and consequently in the green or whitish colour of the leaves. It is common and generally distributed in England, growing in hedgebanks, borders of fields and by roadsides, occurring less frequently in Scotland. This is one of the least troublesome of the Thistles, being an annual and less abundant than some others. Like the last species, it has many variations of form.

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THISTLE, WOOLLY-HEADED

Botanical: *Carduus eriophorus*

Family: N.O. Compositae

---**Parts Used**---Root, leaves.

Carduus eriophorus, the Woolly-headed Thistle, is a biennial. The stem is elongated, branched, not winged, short and furrowed, woolly, 3 to 5 feet high. The lowest leaves are very large, often 2 feet long, the stem leaves much smaller, all deeply cut into, with strap-shaped lobes joined together in pairs in the lower ones. The flowers are light reddish-purple, the large woolly heads covered with reddish curled hairs. The whole plant is a deep dull green. It flowers in August.

This Thistle is eaten when young as a salad. The young stalks, peeled and soaked in water to take off the bitterness, are excellent, and may be eaten either boiled or baked in pies after the manner of Rhubarb, though Gerard says: 'concerning the temperature and virtues of these Thistles we can allege nothing at all.'

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THISTLE, MELANCHOLY

Botanical: *Carduus heterophyllus*

Family: N.O. Compositae

---Parts Used---Root, leaves.

Carduus heterophyllus, the Melancholy Thistle, is said by some to have been the original badge of the House of Stuart, instead of the Cotton Thistle; it is the *Cluas an fleidh* of the Highlanders, and is more common in Scotland than in England, where it only occurs in the midland and northern counties, growing no farther south than the northern counties of Wales. It is a perennial, with a long and creeping root. The stems are tall and stout, often deeply furrowed, and more or less covered with a white or cotton-like down. The leaves clasp the stem at their bases and white dark green above, have their under-surfaces thickly covered with white and down like hairs. Unlike most of the Thistles, the leaves are not continued down the stem at all, and are much simpler in form than the ordinary type of Thistle foliage. Their edges have small bristle-like teeth. The flowerheads are borne singly on long stalks, the bracts that form the involucre being quite destitute of prickles.

Culpepper considered that a decoction of this Thistle in wine 'being drank expels superfluous melancholy out of the body and makes a man as merry as a cricket.'

And he further adds:

'Dioscorides saith, the root borne about one doth the like, and removes all diseases of melancholy: Modern writers laugh at him: Let them laugh that win: my opinion is, that it is the best remedy against all melancholy diseases that grows; they that please may use it.'

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THISTLE, SPEAR

Botanical: *Carduus lanceolatus*

Family: N.O. Compositae

---Parts Used---Root, leaves.

Carduus lanceolatus, the Spear Thistle, is one of our most striking and common Thistles. It grows in waste places, by roadsides, in pastures and cultivated ground, and is generally distributed over the whole kingdom. The plant is a biennial, the stem 1 to 5 feet high, stout and strong, more or less woolly with narrow, spinous wings. The leaves have the segments elongated or lanceshaped, palmately cleft sometimes in large plants, but short and scarcely cleft at all in weaker specimens, each lobe terminating in a long and acute prickle. They are dark, dull green above, paler beneath, where they are sometimes nearly white from the abundance of hair present. The flowerheads stand singly and are large and conspicuous. The flowers are a beautiful purple and, like those of the Artichoke, have the property of curdling milk.

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THISTLE, MUSK

Botanical: *Carduus nutans*

Family: N.O. Compositae

---**Synonym**---Nodding Thistle.

---**Parts Used**---Root, seeds.

Carduus nutans, the Musk Thistle, or Nodding Thistle, occurs in waste places, and is particularly partial to chalky and limestone soils. It is not uncommon in England, but is rare in Scotland, where it is confined to sandy seashores in the southern counties. The stem is erect, 2 to 3 feet high, branched only in larger plants, furrowed, interruptedly winged. The leaves are long, undulated, with scattered hairs on both surfaces, somewhat shiny, green and very deeply cut. This is a common Thistle on a dry soil, and may be known by its large drooping, crimson-purple flowers, the largest of all our Thistle blooms, handsome both in form and colour, and by its faint, musky scent.

The down of this, as of some other species, may be advantageously used as a material in making paper.

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THISTLE, MUSK

(*Carduus nutans*)

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THISTLE, MARSH PLUME

Botanical: *Carduus palustris*

Family: N.O. Compositae

---**Synonym**---*Cirsium palustre*.

---**Parts Used**---Root, leaves.

Carduus palustris, or *Cirsium Palustre*, the Marsh Plume Thistle, is very common in meadows, marshes and bogs, by the sides of ditches, etc., and is generally distributed over the country. It is a biennial, the stem stout, erect, furrowed, 1 to 5 feet high, scarcely branched at all, the branches, when occurring, being much shorter than the main stem, which is narrowly winged, the wings having numerous, long slender spines. The spines on the edges of the narrow, long leaves are similar to those on the wings of the stem. The flowers are dark, dull, crimson purple, small in themselves, but grouped together in large clusters, which distinguish it from most of our thistles, though one or two others exhibit their characteristic in a lesser degree. The plant is a deep dull green, the leaves sometimes slightly hoary beneath.

The stalks of this species are said to be as good as those of the Milk Thistle, and in Evelyn's time were similarly employed.

Culpepper tells us that, in his day, it was 'frequent in the Isle of Ely.'

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THISTLE, CARLINE

Botanical: *Carlina vulgaris*

Family: N.O. Compositae

---Parts Used---Root, leaves.

Carlina vulgaris, the Carline Thistle, closely related to the last-named Thistles, but assigned to a special genus, of which it is the sole representative in this country, is found on dry banks and pastures, being rather scarce except on chalk, where it is plentiful. It is rare in Scotland. It is a biennial, the root, a taproot, producing in the first year a tuft of strap-shaped, nearly flat leaves, hoary, especially beneath, very spinuous, but with the spines short and weak. The flower stem, appearing in the second year, is from 3 inches to 2 feet high, purple, not winged, the leaves on it decreasing in length and increasing in width from bottom to top, strongly veined, spinuous and waved at the edges. The whole plant is pale green, the leaves rigid and scarcely altering after the plant is dead, except in colour. The flowers are straw yellow, the inner florets purplish, the heads distinguished by the strawcoloured, glossy, radiating long inner scales of the involucre, or outer floral cup. The outer bracts are very prickly. The flowers expand in dry and close in moist weather. They retain this property for a long time and form rustic hygrometers, being often seen on the Continent nailed over cottage doors for this purpose. The presence of the Carline Thistle indicates a very poor soil; it particularly infests dry, sandy pastures.

Culpepper describes the 'Wild Carline Thistle (*C. vulgaris*)' as having flowers 'of a fine purple,' so he must have confused it with another species, or given it a wrong name.

The original name of this plant was Carolina, so called after Charlemagne, of whom the legend relates that:

'a horrible pestilence broke out in his army and carried off many thousand men, which greatly troubled the pious emperor. Wherefore he prayed earnestly to God, and in his sleep there appeared to him an angel who shot an arrow from a crossbow, telling him to mark the plant upon which it fell, for with that plant he might cure his army of the pestilence.'

The herb so miraculously indicated was this Thistle. Its medicinal qualities appear to be very like those of Elecampane, it has diaphoretic action, and in large doses is purgative. The herb contains some resin and a volatile essential oil of a camphoraceous nature, like that of Elecampane, which has made it of use for similar purposes as a cordial and antiseptic.

In Anglo-Saxon, the plant was called from the bristly appearance of its flowerheads, *ever throat*, i.e. boar's throat. It was formerly used in magical incantations.

The texture of Carline Thistles is like that of Everlasting Flowers; they scarcely alter their appearance when dead; and the whole plant is remarkably durable.

Other Thistles are the SLENDER-FLOWERED THISTLE (*C. pycnocephalous*) which has stems 2 to 4 feet high, slightly branched, hoary, with broad continuous, deeply-lobed, spinuous wings; leaves cottony underneath; heads many, clustered, cylindrical, small; florets pink. It grows in sandy, waste places, especially near the sea: frequent. Biennial.

The TUBEROUS PLUME THISTLE (*C. tuberosus*). The root is spindle-shaped with tuberous fibres;

stem 2 feet high, single, erect, round hairy, leafless above; leaves not decurrent, deeply pinnatifid, fringed with minute prickles; heads generally solitary, large, egg-shaped; florets crimson. Grows only in Wiltshire. Perennial.

The MEADOW PLUME THISTLE (*C. pratensis*). A small plant, 12 to 18 inches high, with fibrous roots; a cottony stem, giving off runners; few leaves, mostly radical, soft, wavy, fringed with minute spines, not decurrent; and generally solitary heads, with adpressed, slightly cottony bracts and crimson florets. Found in wet meadows; not general. Flowers in August. Perennial.

The sow THISTLE is in no sense a Thistle, but is more nearly allied to the Dandelion.

The Star Thistles belong to the genus *Centaurea*.

See:

[KNAPWEED, BLACK](#)

[KNAPWEED, GREATER](#)

[TEAZLE](#)

[SCABIOUS, FIELD](#)

[SCABIOUS, LESSER](#)

[SCABIOUS, DEVIL'S BIT](#)

[CORNFLOWER](#)

SOW THISTLE (no listing)

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THISTLE, COMMON STAR

Botanical: *Centaurea Colcitraba*

Family: N.O. Compositae

- [Description](#)
- [Medicinal Action and Uses](#)

---**Parts Used**---Herb, seeds, root.

---**Habitat**---South-east England.

Centaurea Calcitraba, the Common Star Thistle, occurs in waste places and by roadsides, but is somewhat rare and chiefly found in south-east England.

---**Description**---The stem is branched, not winged, like most of the true Thistles; the lower leaves are much cut into, almost to the midrib, but the uppermost are merely toothed or with entire margins. On the flowerheads are long sharp spines, 1/2 inch to 1 inch long. The flowers themselves are pale, purplish rose, the ray florets no longer than the central ones. The plant is a dull green, somewhat hairy, and flowers in July.

The specific name of this species is due to the resemblance of the flower-head to the *Caltraps*, or iron ball covered with spikes, formerly used for throwing under horses' feet to lame them on a field of battle.

It is a troublesome weed to agriculturists in certain districts, and is only eradicated by breaking up the ground.

---**Medicinal Action and Uses**---The seeds used to be made into powder and drunk in wine as a remedy for stone, and the powdered root was considered a cure for fistula and gravel.

[\[Top\]](#) [\[Top of Thistle, Common Star\]](#)

THISTLE, YELLOW STAR

Botanical:*Centaurea solstitialis*

Family: N.O. Composite

- [Description](#)
- [Medicinal Action and Uses](#)

---**Synonym**---St. Barnaby's Thistle.

---**Parts Used**---Herb, seeds, root.

Centaurea solstitialis, the Yellow Star Thistle, St. Barnaby's Thistle, is rare and hardly to be considered a native, though found in dry pastures in south-east Kent.

---**Description**---The plant forms a scrubby bush, 18 inches to 2 feet high, with the lower part of the stems very stiff, almost woody, the branches when young very soft, with broad wings, decurrent from the short, strap-shaped leaves. The lower leaves are deeply cut into, the upper ones narrow and with entire margins. The spines of the flower-heads are very long, 1/2 inch to 1 inch in length, pale yellow. The whole plant is hoary.

This plant obtains its name from being supposed to flower about St. Barnabas' Day, June 11 (old style). It is an annual.

---**Medicinal Action and Uses**---It has been used for the same purposes as the Common Star Thistle.

Many species of *Centaurea* grow wild in Palestine, some of formidable size. Canon Tristram mentions some in Galilee through which it was impossible to make way till the plants had been beaten down. 'Thistle' mentioned several times in the Bible refers to some member of this family (*Centaurea*), probably *C. Calcitrapa*, which is a Palestinian weed.