

Centaurea calcitrapa

[Synonyms : *Calcitrapa stellaris*, *Centaurea stellata*]

RED STAR-THISTLE is an annual, biennial or perennial. Native to the Mediterranean it has tiny, pale purplish rose flowers with long, yellowish spines at the base.

It is also known as Big head purple starthistle, *Calcatreppola* (Italian), *Calcatripa* (Portuguese), Caltrap, Caltrops, *Cardo estrelado* (Portuguese), *Cardo estrellado* (Spanish), *Chrpa sikavice* (Czech), *Chausse-trape* (French), Common star thistle, *Fussangel-Flockenblume* (German), Knapweed, Knopweed, Lovely thistle, Maize thorn, Mouse thorn, *Nevädza* (Slovak), Purple star thistle, *Sikavice červená* (Czech), Star-thistle, *Stern-Flockenblume* (German), Thistle root, and *Tistelklint* (Swedish).

The flowers are pollinated by bees and flies.

In Britain this species is considered to be endangered in the wild.

Calcitrapa is derived either from Latin *calcitro* (to kick, resist obstinately) or *calcatrippa* (a possible combination of *calcare* meaning ‘to tread or trample upon’ or *calx* for ‘heel’ together with a Germanic-based word for ‘trap’) with reference to red star-thistle’s thick, sharp spines which make it a pest in pastures.

Red star-thistle is not alone in having dangerous spiny burrs and it or one of its peers is said to have been the inspiration for a military weapon known as a ‘caltrop’ – a common name that many of these plants have attracted. The early versions of the caltrop were spiked iron balls but these devices eventually developed into four (or more) metal spikes arranged in such a way that whichever angle it falls the majority of spikes are supporting it on the ground while one at least points upwards. In centuries past caltrops were thrown in the path of advancing men and animals such as horses or elephants, and in more recent times they have been dropped on roads and runways to impede vehicles including planes.

In Egypt the stems of the plant are eaten locally as a vegetable.

Medicinally, red star-thistle was used by herbalists for curing fevers, liver disorders, plague and syphilis.