

Cynara cardunculus

[Synonyms : *Cynara cardunculus* var. *ferocissima*, *Cynara horrida*, *Cynara scolymus*, *Scolymus cardunculus*]

CARDOON is a perennial (cultivated as an annual). Native to the Mediterranean and southern Europe, it has thistle-like heads of blue-purple flowers.

It is also known as *Agria agkinara* (Greek), *Agries agginares* (Greek), *Alcaucil silvestre* (Spanish), *Artichaut carde* (French), *Artichaut épineux* (French), *Artichaut sauvage* (French), Artichoke thistle, *Artyčok kardový* (Czech), *Caglio* (Italian), *Cardo* (Portuguese), *Cardo de arrecife* (Spanish), *Cardo-do-coalho* (Portuguese), *Cardo hortense* (Portuguese), *Cardon* (French), *Cardoncelle* (Italian), *Cardone* (Italian), *Cardonnette* (French), Cardoon artichoke, *Cardo spinoso* (Italian), *Carduccio* (Italian), *Cardy* (German), Chard, *Chardonnette* (French), *Chardounette* (French), *Ci cai ji* (Chinese), *Gemüseartischocke* (German), Globe artichoke, *Kardi* (German), *Kardon* (Danish, Swedish), *Kardone* (German), *Kardono* (Esperanto), *Pencas* (Portuguese), Prickly cardoon, *Qaqocc tax-Xewk* (Maltese), Scotch thistle, *Spanische Artischocke* (German), *Stachelige Gemüseartischocke* (German), *Stachelige Kardone* (German), Vegetable rennet, Wood artichoke, and *Yabani enginar* (Turkish).

Cardunculus means ‘like a small thistle’.

Some authorities state that the Greek philosopher Theophrastus (c.372-c.287 BC) described cardoon in 4th Century BC – and during the 1st Century AD both the respected Greek physician, Dioscorides and the Roman natural historian, Pliny the Elder (23-79), made reference to it. Dioscorides noted its medicinal benefits and Pliny its large scale cultivation near Carthage. It would seem from the writings of various food authorities that both Greeks and Romans enjoyed cardoon as a delicacy. It should be borne in mind of course that they were eating the stems and the midribs of the large leaves as well as the flowering heads – and this before the plant had been developed to that recognizable today. They also pickled the young buds.

Cardoon leaves have a similar appearance to those of acanthus (*Acanthus spinosus*). Some authorities today challenge the oft repeated view that the latter’s were the inspiration for the traditional ‘acanthus pattern’ used for centuries as the basis of some designs in architecture, on furniture, on material and many other objects familiar in Greek and Roman life.

At one time the cardoon was used as the source of a valued yellow dye.

The edible inner leaves are cooked as a vegetable and can often be referred to as ‘chard’. In Spain the down from this edible thistle was used as an alternative to rennet. (Today some Italian and Spanish cheeses are still made with the help of cardoon as vegetable rennet – although it seems that the head is used instead of the down.) The blanched leafstalks of the Winter vegetable are eaten like artichokes (*Cynara scolymus*) and are a traditional part of Christmas dinner in Provence in France. In South America the flowers are used to curdle milk.

Cardoon has acquired a regrettable reputation in several regions where it has unwittingly been introduced such as parts of Australia, California in the United States and some South

American countries. In these places it is spreading with unacceptable speed and is viewed as an invasive weed.