

Eryngium maritimum

SEA-HOLLY is a biennial or perennial. Native to Europe it has thistle-like pale bluish-green flower heads.

It is also known as *Blauwe Zee-distel* (Dutch), *Cardaön d'banque* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Cardo maritimo* (Portuguese), *Cardo rolador* (Portuguese), *Celyn y Môr* (Welsh), *Chardon des dunes* (French), Common sea-holly, *Eringe* (Spanish), *Eringio marino* (Italian), Eringo, Eringo root, Eryngo, *Havsmartorn* (Swedish), *Housse de mielle* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Kissing comfits, *Kotúč primorský* (Slovak), *Krausdistel* (German), *Kruisdistel* (Dutch), *Máčka přímořská* (Czech), *Martorn* (Swedish), *Martorna* (Swedish), *Meripiikkiputki* (Finnish), *Panicaut* (French), Sea eryngo, Sea holme, Sea hulver, Seaside coyote thistle, Seaside eryngo, *Strand-mandsstro* (Danish), *Strandmannstreu* (German), *Vanlig martorn* (Swedish), and *Xewk ir-ramel* (Maltese).

Maritimum is Latin (of the sea) meaning ‘coastal, or of the sea or seaside’.

The candied roots seem first to have been eaten in order to sweeten the breath when it was known as a kissing comfit. Then it was sought after as an aphrodisiac, popular throughout Europe for 250 years and accepted by one and all as a sweetmeat. The roots have been cooked as a vegetable too, either boiled or roasted. The alleged aphrodisiacal qualities have in actual fact long been prized particularly by Arabs. During the 15th Century when quince conserve (*Cydonia oblonga*), the possible forerunner of marmalade, was imported by England from Portugal, English enthusiasm for this preserve owed a great deal to the sea-holly subsequently added as an aphrodisiac. There must certainly have been a ‘sufficiency’ of the plant near Colchester in England as 17th Century records show that an apothecary, Robert Burton, set up a business there to prepare the candied root as a commercial ‘confection’. (Some authorities believe this trade in sea-holly centring on Colchester began in about 1600 and lasted into the 1860s.) It is understood that Colchester presented royalty with samples of candied root which was believed to have done much to encourage its subsequent sale. The young flowering shoots have also been cooked as if they were garden asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*).

William Shakespeare (1564-1616), the famous English playwright, mentions sea-holly in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Sir John Falstaff declares

..... Let the sky rain potatoes; let it thunder to the
tune of “Green Sleeves”; hail kissing-comfits, and snow eringoes;
.....

A superstition relating to sea-holly claims that the plant is capable of hobbling a straying lover – and equally that it can also stop a grazing goat in its tracks as it munches it – and thus the whole herd.

Medicinally, herbalists recommended sea-holly for treating coughs, kidney and bladder disorders, jaundice, nervous disorders, fluid retention, stings, snake bites and ear problems. Today it can be prescribed for urinary disorders.