

Onopordum acanthium

[Synonyms : *Acanos spina*, *Onopordon acanthium*]

COTTON THISTLE is a biennial. Native from Europe (rare in Scotland) to central Asia it has thistle-like heads of tiny pale pinkish-purple (rarely white) flowers.

It is also known as *Alcachofa salvaje* (Spanish), Ass's oats, Common thistle, Down thistle, *Eselsdistel* (German), Giant thistle, Heraldic thistle, Musk thistle, Oak thistle, *Onopordon faux-acanthe* (French), Ornamental thistle, *Ostropes obyčajný* (Slovak), *Ostropes trubil* (Czech), *Pet-d'âne* (French), Pig leaves, Queen Mary's thistle, Rough dashle, Scotch cottonthistle, Scotch thistle, Scotch thistle, Scottish thistle, Scottish thistle, Silver thistle, Star thistle, Thistle-on-thistle, *Tistelborre* (Swedish), *Ulltistel* (Swedish), *Weg-distel* (Dutch), Woolly thistle, and *Ysgallen Gotymog* (Welsh); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of austerity, defiance, desolation, grief, independence, rejection, and retaliation.

The flowers are pollinated by long-tongued bees, and by butterflies.

Acanthium is derived from the genus name *Acanthus* meaning 'either like plants in that genus, or spiny'.

The name Queen Mary's thistle is said to refer to Mary, Queen of Scots (1542-1587) with whom many traditionally associate this plant.

In Nordic mythology cotton thistle is dedicated to Thor, the god of war, – and the Roman mythological goddess of agriculture, Ceres, carried a torch of cotton thistle.

Cotton thistle is believed by many authorities to be the true Scottish thistle. (Debate continues among academics however on the species of thistle chosen as the Scottish symbol and this centres primarily on this species and the spear thistle, *Cirsium vulgare*.) Originally the badge of the House of Stuart some authorities believe cotton thistle became the emblem of Scotland in the 8th Century in commemoration of an unsuccessful Danish attack on Stirling Castle. The story goes that the Danes were invading Scotland – yet again. At that period it was normal for armies to march only during the day and the Danes decided to introduce an element of surprise. Not only would they move at night but they would also go barefoot to prevent their movement being heard. Unfortunately one warrior is said to have stepped on a particularly vigorous specimen of the cotton thistle and yelled out in pain. This warned the Scots of the unanticipated and imminent invasion and the Danes were routed. An inventory of the property of James III (1451-1488) of Scotland (made on his death) includes a hanging embroidered with thistles, his heraldic device. The marriage of his son, James IV (1473-1513), to Margaret Tudor in August 1503 occasioned the celebrated poem *The Thrissil and the Rois* from the Scottish poet, William Dunbar (c.1460-c.1520). And his grandson, James V (1512-1542) of Scotland established The Most Ancient and Most Noble Order of the Thistle in 1540, a fraternity of Scottish knights that today (after The Most Noble Order of the Garter formed in 1348), is the second most ancient of the British Orders. James III's great, great grandson became James VI (1566-1625) of Scotland from 1567 and thirty-six years later James I of England. While he was King of Scotland, the Country's coinage bore the thistle in its centre and after his additional accession to the English throne the plant maintained a place on the coinage of the British realm. The thistle (representing Scotland) is depicted

today in the coat of arms of the United Kingdom in the grass on which the shield rests. A wreath of thistles surrounded the regimental cap badge worn by The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, while that of the Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) carries a wreath of thistles within the star of the Order of the Thistle. A thistle features in the crest badge of the Fergus(s)on clan too.

It seems that the cotton thistle also took an active role in Freemasonry ritual in the north of England where members are said to have carried a cotton thistle in their processions. Thistles provide a weather oracle as their heads close up when rain is approaching. They were also used as love oracles.

The flower heads have been used to adulterate saffron (*Crocus sativus*) and, without the flowers, have also been prepared and eaten like artichokes (*Cynara scolymus*). The rindless stalks have also provided food.

Cotton on the stems has provided stuffing for bedding, and cushions, and in Continental Europe the seed-oil has not only been used for cooking but for lighting as well.

At some point cotton thistle must have crossed the Atlantic as records show that it came to be known to the North American Iroquois Indians – and for them it seems to have been much tied into witchcraft.

Medicinally, herbalists used cotton thistles for treating liver disorders, jaundice, rickets in children and melancholy. It was also thought that the leaf juice was a remedy for cancer, and skin ulcers. Today cotton thistle is used by the pharmaceutical industry in some proprietary medicines.

It is the birthday flower for 17th May.