

Silybum marianum

[Synonyms : *Carduus mariae*, *Carduus marianum*, *Carduus marianus*, *Carthamus maculatum*, *Cirsium maculatum*, *Mariana lactea*, *Mariana mariana*, *Silybum maculatum*, *Silybum mariae*]

MILK THISTLE is an annual or biennial. Native to the Mediterranean and central and western Europe, it has sharp yellow spined, violet-purple thistle-like flower heads. It is also known as Blessed Mary thistle, Blessed milk thistle, Blessed thistle, *Cardincha* (Spanish), *Chardon Marie* (French), *Gevlekte Silybum* (Afrikaans), *Gül aghân* (Arabic), Holy thistle, *Kardo Maria* (Esperanto), Kenguel seed, *Khurfesh* (Arabic), Lady's milk, Lady's thistle, Leaves of Mary, *Maarianohdake* (Finnish), Marian thistle, *Mariatistel* (Swedish), *Mariendistel* (German), Marythistle, Mediterranean milk thistle, Milky thistle, Milky thrissel, *Ostropestřec mariánský* (Czech), Our Lady's milk thistle, Our Lady's thistle, Pig leaves, St. Mary's thistle, *Silybum mariánske* (Slovak), Spotted thistle, Thistle, Virgin Mary's thistle, Virgin's thistle, Wild artichoke, *Xewk baghli* (Maltese), and *Ysgallen Fair* (Welsh).

Warning – the seed must only be used by a qualified practitioner. It is poisonous for some animals.

Marianum is a name given to several plants with mottled leaves as, according to an old tradition, the white marks appeared when drops of the Virgin Mary's milk fell on the leaves.

The plant used to be actively cultivated in Europe as a vegetable (its boiled young shoots were thought to be far better than cabbage, *Brassica oleracea* var. *capitata*, in 18th Century Britain) and they were also baked in pies. The roots were cooked like salsify (*Tragopogon porrifolius*), the flower heads were prepared like those of artichoke (*Cynara scolymus*), and the young leaves were added to salads. (Today apparently the young leaves and midribs are still enjoyed as a salad in Arabian dishes – and are also eaten by hikers.) The roasted seeds have provided a coffee substitute.

The leaves have been fed to pigs and are also much enjoyed by goldfinches.

Medicinally, it was often used instead of blessed thistle (*Centaurea benedicta*). Herbalists used to recommend it to encourage milk in nursing mothers, and to treat catarrh, pleurisy, fevers, plague, jaundice and liver disorders (particularly in Germany), as well as for fluid retention and as a general tonic. It was used externally as a remedy for snake bites. Today it is primarily used in treating jaundice and liver ailments, it is considered to be an antidote for poisoning caused by the death cap mushroom, and is used in homoeopathic treatments. (The pharmaceutical industry can also include it as an ingredient in some proprietary medicines especially in Germany.)