

Sonchus oleraceus

[Synonyms : *Sonchus ciliatus*, *Sonchus mairei*]

SMOOTH SOW-THISTLE is an annual or perennial. Native to Asia, Europe and the Mediterranean it has dandelion-like light yellow flowers.

It is also known as Annual sow thistle, Colewort, Common sonchus, Common sow thistle, Dindle, *Dodak* (Punjabi), Dog's thistle, *Gemüse-Gänse-distel* (German), *Gewöhnliche Gänse-distel* (German), *Gewone Sydissel* (Afrikaans), Hare's bush, Hare's colewort, Hare's house, Hare's lettuce, Hare's palace, Hare's thistle, *Kaalivalvatti* (Finnish), *Kålmjölktistel* (Swedish), *Kålmolke* (Swedish), *Kohl-Gänse-distel* (German), *Laiteron* (French), *Laitron* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Lecheros* (Spanish), *Llaethysgallen* (Welsh), Low thistle, *Mahiu* (Kikuyu), Mary's seed, Milk thistle, Milkweed, Milkwort, Milky dashel, Milky disle, Milky dickle, Milky tassel, *Mjölktistel* (Swedish), *Mléč hladký* (Czech), *Mléč zelinný* (Czech), *Murrair* (Arabic), *Pororua* (Maori), *Puha* (Maori), Rabbit's meat, Rabbit's victuals, *Ratrinta* (Telugu), *Rauriki* (Maori), Silver and gold, Snow thistle, Sow bread, Sow dingle, Sow-flower, Sow thistle, Sprout thistle, Swine's thistle, Swinies, *Tfief* (Maltese), Thistle, and *Zohos* (Greek).

Oleraceus means 'vegetable- or cooking herb-like or of the herb-, vegetable or kitchen garden'.

Archaeologists have found traces of smooth sow-thistle in Roman excavations. Pliny the Younger (62-113) who followed in his uncle and adopted father's footsteps and became an acclaimed Roman orator and writer, relates how Theseus was given a dish of smooth sow-thistles before the battle of Marathon between the Greeks and the Persians in 490 BC. Both the Greeks and the Romans are believed not only to have eaten the plant as a sustaining food particularly as a salad vegetable but also to have used it medicinally.

Even in the early 20th Century the leaves were being included in salads in some parts of Europe. In the intervening period smooth sow-thistle was also added to soups and was prepared as a vegetable like spinach (*Spinacia oleracea*). [It is eaten today similarly in New Zealand particularly by the Maoris]. During the voyages in the early 1770s on HMS *Resolution* led by the English navigator, Captain James Cook (1728-1779) the crew ate the plant both as a salad and a cooked vegetable. In the 20th Century during the 2nd World War New Zealanders were encouraged to eat it as a source of Vitamin C. The roots of the smooth sow-thistle are said to have been eaten by Australian Aborigines and like the Maoris the Indonesians also cooked the plant (preferring this species to others). It has also provided a vegetable in the Philippines.

In the Middle Ages in Britain a lotion thought to improve ladies' complexions was made from this plant, and elsewhere the juice has also been used cosmetically to clean the skin.

Country lore (particularly in Germany) contends that a hare on the run can rest safely under the plant's protection. (German lore suggested that the hare more than any other animal was prone to melancholy against which the smooth sow-thistle could also give protection.)

Records show that some North American Indian tribes were familiar with the plant both as a source of food and medicine. Although Houma Indians fed their pigs on it (but did not apparently eat it themselves) others such as the Yaqui, some of the Tohono O'Odham and the Kamia ate the leaves cooked or raw. For some of the Tohono O'Odham Indians the milky juice did not only provide a purgative but also a treatment for 'kicking' the opium

habit. Houma Indians on the other hand used the plant to treat some period problems, ease diarrhoea and relieve teething children's discomfort.

It is a fact that rabbits nibble the smooth sow-thistle with relish. Pigs, sheep and goats also enjoy the leaves and stems, but they are rejected by horses. In Switzerland it has been used as food for commercially reared, edible snails.

Medicinally, herbalists used to recommend the milky juice in the stems for treating liver and intestinal ailments, as well as for nursing mothers, and for treating wheezing and deafness. It has also been used to treat fluid retention and has been used in treatments for addiction to some opium derivatives (*Papaver somniferum*). Today smooth sow-thistle is used in homoeopathic treatments.