

What's in a name?

There are some 200 different types of thistle. The tallest and most well-known is perhaps the Spear thistle (*C. vulgare*) and it is this species that the Scots regard as their national flower. However, the English refer to the Cotton thistle (*O. acanthium*), as the Scots thistle. This variety is rarely found north of the border and is believed to be a native of East Anglia originally.



Other species include the Milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*) introduced from the Mediterranean in the sixteenth century for medicinal purposes (see below), and the Creeping thistle (*C. arvense*). This the most common species in the UK. The Milk thistle is characterised by white veins which run through the leaves, but it is said that these developed when feeding Jesus, milk leaked from the Virgin Mary's breast and fell on the leaves.

Botany & Ecology

The seeds are carried in the wind and will travel great distances and once established, they are difficult to eliminate. The level of prickly spines varies between species with those more adapted to dry poor soils having less spines.



Not all species flower every year and the biennial varieties appear to have a higher ecological value. The flowers produce more pollen for bees. There are more seeds for birds like the Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*) and more foliage for butterfly larvae like the Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*). The seed is also softer and preferred by birds when lining nests. Thistle flowers also rich in nectar and are favoured by the Fritillary's butterflies (*Boloria spp*).

Folklore

A Scottish folk tale tells us how thistle came to be the national emblem of Scotland.

Legend has it that in the mid 900's, Norse invaders landed undetected on Scottish shores with the purpose of claiming Scotland for themselves. They waited until dark and removed their boots in order to creep up on the encampment of Scottish warriors. One Norseman apparently stepped on a thistle and his scream of pain alerted the Scots who drove the Norsemen back into the sea and saved Scotland forever.

Folk Medicine

Most species have been used as a food source throughout the ages. The young leaves were stripped of their spines and eaten as salad and the hearts of the flowers have been eaten like miniature globe artichokes.

Maud Grieve recorded that Pliny and other medieval physicians had thought it could return hair to bald heads and that in the early nineteenth century it had been believed to be a remedy for headaches, plague, canker sores, vertigo, and jaundice.

Milk thistle is still prescribed by modern herbalists to help with liver problems. This includes detoxification and to help repair damage done during chemotherapy. It is also used to increase milk in nursing mothers and to help lower blood sugar in diabetics.

*Please note, readers should take advice from a qualified doctor or herbalist before using plants as a cure for ailments.