

~ Ask Granny Earth ~

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Thistle

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I have a profusion of blue thistles growing in my yard. They are beautiful and eventually turn into white cotton-like puffs. Since I have so many of them, I am wondering what they're good for and how to use them medicinally.

I will try to help you out as to the medicinal properties of Thistles in general. Last year I did extensive research on some of our local thistles for a customer. He brought me a sample of one he was particularly interested in. My research turned up many different species of 'thistle' but not the one he was interested in. Due to my recent move, the subsequent disorganization and lack of internet connection, I cannot put my hands on that research at the present time. My herbalist friend said that your thistle sounds like it is the Canadian Thistle, because of the blue flowers.

However, according to what I remember, most all thistles have similar healing qualities, with Milk Thistle and Holy Thistle being the most researched. Thistle is the old English name for a large family of plants with many species, all having jaggy, prickly needles.

Milk Thistle (*Silybum marianum*): Has pink flowers and is the one that there seems to be most research available on. It has been used in Europe as a remedy for depression and liver problems for hundreds of years. Recent research supports traditional herbal knowledge, proving that this herb has the remarkable ability to not only protect the liver from damage resulting from alcohol and other poisoning but also to rejuvenate liver cells.

In the old days the Milk Thistle flower heads were boiled and eaten in the springtime as a 'spring tonic' for the purpose of restoring the system after being deprived of fresh vegetables all winter long (Dandelion greens were also considered a 'spring tonic'). I suppose that these flower heads had been dried the previous summer for this very purpose. They were also eaten to increase a new mother's breast-milk production and for 'melancholia' (depression) which was traditionally associated with the liver function.

Gerard stated in his Herbal of 1597, "My opinion is that this milk thistle is the best remedy that grows against all melancholy diseases." The liver was believed to be the seat of all negative emotions.

Silymarin is the substance in the seeds of the Milk Thistle that seems to be the most responsible for the powerful healing effects on the liver. Today it is being used successfully in Western herbal medicine to treat Hepatitis, Jaundice, Cirrhosis, and in conditions where the liver is under stress, such as chemotherapy prescribed in the treatment of cancer.

Holy Thistle or **Blessed Thistle** (*Cnicus* or *Carduus benedictus*): Has yellow flowers that bloom in late summer and autumn. It contains lignans, sesquiterpene lactones, volatile oil, polyacetylenes, flavonoids, triterpene, phytosterols and tannins. Holy thistle is a bitter herb, which is both anti-inflammatory and antibiotic. Anytime an herb is described as "bitter", this means that it aids digestion by stimulating the secretions of the stomach, intestines and gallbladder while also assisting the function of the liver. This herb has been esteemed as a medicine since the Middle Ages and was used to treat the plague. It was also known as the 16th century remedy for headaches.

Blessed Thistle is said to be one of the best 'diaphoretics' (induces sweating) and possess great virtues against all kinds of fevers. It is also attributed with great power in the purification and circulation of the blood, which in turn strengthens the brain and memory.

Culpepper (1652) considered Milk Thistle and Holy Thistle to be equivalent for removal of obstructions from the liver and spleen and for curing the infection of the plague. He recommended an infusion of the fresh root and seeds for an aid against jaundice and for expelling stones.

So, it would seem that all parts of the Thistle can be used for healing. This bitter herb is especially good for the liver and digestion. It also provides

strong antibiotic and antiviral properties as it aids in the restorative process of the body.

To make an infusion- add one ounce of the herb (or a few pinches) to a pint of boiling water. You could use the leaves, seeds or the root. Simmer for 15 – 20 minutes (longer for root), add honey to taste and drink throughout the day for several days. For chronic conditions, drink more and more often until improvement is noticed. Once again, the body has its own wisdom, if we can just learn to listen to it.