

THISTLE

Composite family (Sunflower)

INTRODUCTION:

The word for *thistle* (Hebrew “dardar”, Greek “tribolus”) appears in six passages of Scripture. (Genesis 3:17-19, II Kings 14:9, II Chronicles 25:18, Job 31:38-40, Hosea 10:8 and Matthew 7:16)

A thistle (as we know it) is a prickly plant, thorny and harsh. There is rather uniform agreement that most of the references to “thistle” and “thorns” in the Old Testament and New Testament are generic in character. Although there are many types of thistles growing in the Holy Land, we will only look at a few as they mostly have similar – if disagreeable – characteristics.

THISTLES THAT PROBABLY GROW IN PALESTINE:

“Mary’s Thistle” or “Milk Thistle” (Silybum marianum)

HISTORY: European wet nurses used a special diet which included milk thistle, believed to increase lactation. It was so named because the white veins that mottled the leaves represented drops of the Virgin Mary’s milk. The hardest part was removing the spines, without which the plant makes a wholesome and delicious food – long popular in France.

MEDICINAL USES: This thistle is said to restore impaired liver function (i.e. from hepatitis) by carrying off bile. Modern research confirms this. The chemical *silymarin* is used to stimulate growth in liver cells. It is also used as an antidote to the deathcap mushroom (which kills liver cells).

PLANT FACTS: It is native to the Mediterranean region, but is found on the Pacific Coast. It grows 6 feet tall and has a crimson/violet flower. It can be used as a salad green or cooked vegetable.

“Star Thistle or Caltrops” (Centaurea calcitropa)

HISTORY: “Caltrops” were metal traps with four spikes planted by European soldiers to damage enemy feet and horse hooves. Possibly when they returned from wars they gave the name “Caltrops” to the star thistle because of their resemblance to the war trap.

USES: The young scales and flower head are edible, like artichoke. The tender leaves are used in salad. Camels are fed this herb! Medicinally, it was used to reduce fevers and kidney stones. An infusion tea made of the leaves and flowers was used as a diuretic.

PLANT FACTS: It is a native European plant but has spread widely in the U.S. once introduced by settlers and has become a weed and a pest, threatening range grazing land. It is 8-20 inches tall with a pink/purple flower.

“Spotted Golden Thistle” (Scolymus maculates)

We have a picture of this one, but little information about it.

“Blessed or Holy Thistle” (Cnicus benedictus)

We have no picture of this thistle. It was used by monks as a cure for smallpox by infusion tea from the plant tops. Now it is a herbal medicine used as a contraceptive, for cancer and infection treatment and for heart ailments.

“Teasel or Rain Thistle” (Dipsacus sylvestris)

DESCRIPTION: The upper leaves join to form a basin in which rainwater collects and this gave the other names to it. It grows 3-6 feet tall. And has bluish-lavender flowers. The heads are spiny, and egg shaped. The name “teasel” and the word “tease” both come from the Anglo-Saxon word “taesan” which means to pull to pieces.

MEDICINAL USES: The water was once believed to be cooling to inflamed eyes or recommended as a cosmetic to “render the face fair”. The root boiled in wine was used on warts. Tea from the roots became an appetite stimulant, jaundice remedy and diuretic. It is seldom used in herbal medicines today. The greatest use now is the dried seed is used in floral decorations.

OTHER USES: This thistle has been used in production of cloth, though no one knows how. Some think it may have been used for “fulling” which is the process of beating cloth to thicken it. Others say it was used for “carding” (combing and untangling wool to prepare it for spinning).

Bibliography: Magic and Medicine of Plants (Readers Digest); Zondervan’s Pictorial Dictionary; Consider the Lilies (John & Katherine Paterson); Flowers and Fruits of the Bible (John Chancellor); Flowers of the Holy Land (Bertha Spafford Vestor).