

ברקן – Milk-Thistle – Silybum Marianum

A Thorny Liver Remedy

Among the edible, volunteer greens in my garden, the blessed milk-thistle's shiny pale green prickly-edged leaves streaked with white veins, catches my eye. Its blackish seeds – that only ripen at the end of summer when white cottony fibers appear – are the main medicinal part of milk-thistle. I also use its leaves, as herbology teaches that the entire plant shares the medicinal benefit of any part of the plant. From ancient time, people used all parts of the milk-thistle, including the root.

They would also eat the flower-head, which is similar and related to the artichoke. The leaves, which are just beginning to appear in the Judean Hills following the winter rains, can be added to a green smoothie. You can use tender small leaves for salad while larger older leaves go well with stir-fry. Carefully cut off the outer spikes before using milk-thistle leaves, except when using them in a smoothie where the blender completely macerates them. Since we are still in the month of Tevet, which is especially suited for rectifying the liver, I thought to share some teachings about the milk-thistle, which is one of the main liver remedies – in addition to Burdock, Oregon grape, Dandelion and Yellow dock – the acronym for BODY. None of these herbs except for dandelion – which we discussed last week – grows in my garden. Similar to dandelion, milk-thistle is a profoundly cleansing, gentle liver and blood detoxifier that encourages a healthy bile flow. It is prized for its powerfully protecting regenerative effects upon the liver cells.



Most Cursed among Plants

The thistle has a very thorny reputation. Some people even considered it a cursed flower, since as a result of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, the earth was cursed to produce thorns and thistles:

וְקוֹץ וְדַרְדָּר תַּצְמִיחַ לָךְ וְאָכַלְתָּ אֹתוֹ עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה: (ספר בראשית פרק ג פסוק יח)

“It shall bring forth thorns and thistles for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field”
(*Bereishit* 3:18).

It is interesting that as we are coming closer to the final redemption the curses of paradise are gradually reverting. Women give birth more easily, and much physical labor “in the sweat of the brow” has been automatized. Likewise, although the thorns are annoying when they grow in our vegetable or flowerbeds or when we experience bristling thistles on bare feet, so many health benefits can still be gleaned from various thorns. Even Rashi agrees that thorns and thistles are fit for food but only after special preparation. During the final redemption, the lower lifeforms will be elevated. For example, “The wolf will lie with the lamb,” (*Yeshu’ahu* 11:6). His instincts will be raised up and no longer desire eating another animal. Likewise, plant life is being elevated and the value of the thorns is proportionally increasing.

Potent Detoxifier

Milk-thistle has been revered for at least 2000 years as an effective healing herb, with Pliny the Elder alluding to its cleansing and healing properties in the 1st century. Nicholas Culpeper, the well-known 17th-century pharmacist, cited its use for opening “obstructions” of the liver and

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spleen and recommended it for the treatment of jaundice. It has also been used as an anti-depressant, due to its ability to move stagnant liver energy. It is one of the best preventative medicines, as it not only protects each liver-cell from incoming toxins, but simultaneously encourages the liver to more effectively process and release damaging substances that are already built up in the system, such as alcohol, drugs, medications, mercury, heavy metals and pesticides. Milk-thistle is excellent for alleviating a hangover. It helps the liver eliminate alcohol faster from the body (Jane Clarke, the Daily Mail's Nutritionist). If you've had a drink or two, try taking milk-thistle before you go to bed and again in the morning. Due to its detoxifying abilities, it also helps the body to digest rich food and can be used as a travel sickness preventive. As part of a detox regime, it helps improve skin condition in those prone to acne or psoriasis.

Anti-Oxidant, Soothing, De-stressor

Milk-thistle is cool, bitter, sweet and enters the liver and spleen. This demulcent herb soothes and moistens both kidney and bladder irritations, as well as mucous membranes and inflammations. Milk-thistle's main active bio constituent is silymarin, which selectively acts as an anti-oxidant and protects the body from free radical damage specifically in the intestines and stomach. It may be used for stomach disorders, as a cold tea and a general tonic for new mothers. Silymarin, is alcohol soluble and is not extracted effectively in water. It works best as an alcohol tincture, which may also be added to teas. Recent research indicates that milk-thistle stimulates the immune system and encourages the growth and protection of healthy nerve tissue. Externally, its leaves may be used on the forehead for alleviating headaches, itchy skin and nausea (just keep it away from your eyes). Milk-thistle is wonderful and appropriate for anyone who is under stress, uses alcohol, recreational drugs, prescription medications, or lives in today's modern times of pesticides, environmental toxins, and pollution, which is virtually every person in an industrial nation.

Spiritual Properties of Milk-Thistle

In Hebrew, milk-thistle is called **בִּרְקָן**/*barkan* – 'lightening.' This is because the intricate white pattern on the leaves resembles lightening. Interestingly, according to a superstitious saying, throwing thistle into a fire keeps lightning away from the home. To Anglos, these same white veins looks as if milk has spilled on them. The English name also indicates that they produce a milky sap when punctured, just like many other leaves in the lettuce family. The leaf was also used to support milk production in lactating mothers (Weeds. Milk Thistle. Grieve M. A Modern Herbal. New York: Dover Publications, Inc). The thistle became the emblem of Scotland in the 1200s, as well as the Chivalric Order of the Thistle in 1540. Throughout Celtic regions thistle represents nobility, graciousness, bravery, devotion, durability, strength and determination. When you try picking a thistle, you will find they demand respect...and gloves. The sturdy, forceful nature of this flower explains the traditional symbolism of thistles for overcoming even the most unshakable enemy. The Victorian Language of Flowers identifies thistle as the flower of intrusion (or perhaps more distinctly a warning against unwanted meddling. Yet, its green leaves naturally sends out peaceful energies of trust. It offers the characteristics of good advice, listening skills and helpfulness to others. Combine this with purple flowers' transcendent, introspective nature that unites the physical with spiritual. Green and purple together harmonize with humanitarians, leaders and visionary artists. Thus, the energy of the milk-thistle guides you outwardly and upward toward higher consciousness and psychic abilities.

Culinary Uses:

Early on, all parts of the milk-thistle were used for a variety of purposes. The leaves were extensively utilized and often eaten as a vegetable. Milk-thistle tastes delicious just like spinach. When raw, the leaves taste like a cross between spinach and romaine lettuce – an earthy, slightly bitter taste that works as a perfect accompaniment to a vegetable salad. When cooked, milk-thistle work as a terrific spinach replacement in all recipes. The stem of the immature plant reminds me of the taste of Swiss chard stems. Milk-thistle extract is now also used in a beverage called Rockstar Energy Drink as an energy-enhancing agent.

Hands On:

The milk-thistle thorns aren't as big of an issue as they might seem. Once you cook them, the thorns soften, and you can eat them, thorns and all. Frying the leaves makes them crispy like potato chips and takes away irritation from the thorns. Boiling them also softens the thorns enough that you can eat them like spinach.

Milk-Thistle Stir-Fry

4 Tablespoons olive oil
 2 medium size onions chopped
 3 garlic cloves minced
 15 medium size milk-thistle leaves
 Sea salt and pepper to taste

1. With your household scissors cut off the very edge of the thistle leaf. (Bigger ones are less work.) If you hold the milk-thistle leaves by the middle, you won't get pricked. Some people may want to wear gloves but I don't bother.
2. Cut the milk-thistle leaves into thin strips
3. Sauté the onions until translucent
4. Add the garlic and continue to stir-fry until everything is slightly browned
5. Mix in the chopped milk-thistle leaves but turn off the fire after 2-4 minutes