**Silybum marianum**  
[SIGH-lee-bum mar-ee-AH-num]  
(formerly *Carduus marianus*)

**Family:** Compositae

**Names:** lady’s thistle, marian thistle, Mary thistle, St. mary thistle, silybum, holy thistle; emetic root, snake milk, milk ipecac

**Description:** Wide, bristly plant. Height: to 4 feet. Width: 2-3 feet. Flowers: bristly tight cup, deep purple, 2 inches. Leaves: Large, 2 ½ by 1 foot, glossy, thick, marbled with white veinlike patterns, prickly edges. Fruit: oval, smooth, mottled with brown. Blooms: June to September. When broken, the leaves and stems exude a milky sap.


**Constituents:** seeds: essential oil, flavolignans called silymarine, such as silybin. Nutritional profile: highest in chromium (.22mg); iron (10.6mg); manganese (1.47mg); phosphorus (706mg); selenium (.71mg); tin (4.2mg).

**History:** Early Christian tradition dedicated milk thistle to Mary calling it marian thistle. This came from the old belief that the milk-white veins of the leaves originated in the milk of the Virgin which once fell upon a plant of thistle. European wet nurses once kept to a special diet, which included it for this reason. It was considered interchangeable with blessed thistle (*Cnicus benedictus*). Suggested as a bitter digestive, liver tonic and poison antidote. German physician Rademacher reported success in giving it to his liver patients in the early 19th century. That tincture is still listed in some pharmacopoeias today (Tinctura Cardui Mariae Rademacher). Both Pliny the Elder and Culpepper noted milk thistle to be beneficial to the liver. The Eclectics used it for varicose veins, menstrual difficulty and congestion in liver, spleen and kidneys.

**Properties:** Nutritive, slightly bitter, sweet and tonic to the liver, spleen and kidneys

**Medicinal Uses.** Silymarin is poorly soluble in water, so aqueous preparations such as teas are ineffective, except for use as supportive treatment in gallbladder disorders because of cholagogic and spasmylytic effects. The drug is best administered parenterally because of poor absorption of silymarin from the gastrointestinal tract. The drug must be concentrated for oral use. Silymarin’s hepatoprotective effects may be explained by its altering of the outer liver cell membrane structure, as to disallow entrance of toxins into the cell. This alteration involves silymarin’s ability to block the toxin’s binding sites, thus hindering uptake by the cell. Hepatoprotection by silymarin can also be attributed to its antioxidant properties by scavenging prooxidant free radicals and increasing intracellular concentration of
glutathione, a substance required for detoxicating reactions in liver cells.

Silymarin’s mechanisms offer many types of therapeutic benefit in cirrhosis with the main benefit being hepatoprotection. Use of milk thistle, however, is inadvisable in decompensated cirrhosis. In patients with acute viral hepatitis, silymarin shortened treatment time and showed improvement in serum levels of bilirubin, AST and ALT.

**Dosage:** Usual dose of the unstandardized liquid extract is one dropperful (40 drops) 2 or 3 times daily; of the powdered extract standardized to 10% silymarin, is up to 100 mg 2 or 3 times daily; of the powdered extract standardized to 80% silymarin, is 1 or 2 tablets daily.

**Toxicity:** Few adverse effects have been seen other than brief GI disturbances and mild allergic reactions.

**Ritual Use:** Herb of the moon. This variety of thistle may be used to work with the virginal or maiden aspect of the Goddess.

**Culinary Uses:** The steamed leaves are quite tasty, providing the prickly edges have been cut off. The young stalks were once widely cultivated as a vegetable and their taste was considered superior to that of cabbage in the 18th century. The seeds can be ground and sprinkled on food. Flower portion was eaten “artichoke-style.” Roasted seeds were used as a coffee substitute.

**References:**
- *The Review of Natural Products*, 111 West Port Plaza, Ste 300, St. Louis, MO 63146-3098 (Excellent reference with extensive listing of studies done. January 1997

**Resources:**
- Companion Plants, [www.companionplants.com](http://www.companionplants.com)
- Crimson Sage, [http://www.crimson-sage.com](http://www.crimson-sage.com)
- The Rosemary House, [www.therosemaryhouse.com](http://www.therosemaryhouse.com)

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