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To protect and prevent liver damage

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"While mainstream medicine has little to offer those with disease of the liver, studies have shown that milk thistle's healing value is significant."

By Patricia Woods-LaVoie

Before you pull that ugly, pointy weed out of your garden, give it a second look. If it's tall, has large prickly leaves and reddish purple flowers with sharp spines, chances are you actually have the remarkable herb known as a milk thistle growing amongst your vegetables and herbs.

Ancient medicine

Milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*) is native to the Kashmir region of India and Pakistan, but now can be found growing in most temperate climates. Its leaves are edible, and some vegetable gardeners actually cultivate the plant as a substitute for spinach.

Legend says that it was named "marianum" because, after a drop of the Virgin Mary's breast milk touched the plant, its leaf veins turned white. Milk thistle's most important property, however, is medicinal. For more than 2,000 years, the seeds of the plant have been used to treat liver disorders.

Statistically significant findings While mainstream medicine has little to offer those with disease of the liver, studies have shown that milk thistle's healing value is significant. "Most liver treatment," says herbal medicine authority Varro Tyler, Ph.D., the Lily distinguished professor of pharmacognosy (natural product medicine) at Purdue University, "is simply supportive." Indeed,



more than 100 studies have confirmed milk thistle's liver-protective value. A 1989 report in the Journal of Hepatology described a study involving 170 people with advanced alcoholic cirrhosis, an often fatal condition claiming 25,000 lives a year. The study participants were divided into two groups: one received 200 mg of milk thistle extract three times a day, while the other received a placebo. Both

groups were followed for four years. During that time, the death rate in the placebo group was about 60 percent while among those taking milk thistle, only 40 percent died, statistically a highly significant difference. Even the American Medical Association has tracked the benefits of milk thistle, saving that evidence of its effects in humans is "provocative but preliminary."



In tests, the 4-year mortality rate decreased by 30 percent in patients who were treated for 2 years with 140 mg of milk thistle 3 times a day. The effects of this treatment were greatest in alcohol related cirrhosis.

Milk thistle for protection

In animal studies, milk thistle protects liver cells against a variety of hepatoxins, including drugs (such as acetaminophen and amitriptyline), toxins

(deathcap mushrooms and alcohol), viruses and radiation. It scavenges free radicals, blocks toxin entry into cells, inhibits inflammation and stimulates liver regeneration. That having been said, milk thistle can be an aid in death cap mushroom poisoning, hepatitis, gallstones and even psoriasis.

How it works

Milk thistle extract works in several ways. First, it strengthens the outer membranes of liver cells, preventing penetration by liver damaging substances, such as alcohol or mushroom toxins. Second, it protects the liver cells through antioxidant action, neutralizing cell damage caused by high-fat diets, smoking and other toxic substances. Last, the extract inhibits the action of the enzyme largely responsible for inflammation in hepatitis.

Alcohol is not the only substance that puts stress on the liver. Pollutants, pesticides and food additives are all things that the liver must detoxify. The liver is the body's second largest organ so, fortunately for most people, millions of its cells can die and it can still function normally. Research has proven, however, that milk thistle can protect this vital organ. Remember, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

