

WHEN TRYING ONE A WILD PLANT FOR THE FIRST TIME, TRY TASTING JUST A SMALL AMOUNT OF THE PREPARED PLANT TO CHECK YOUR TOLERANCE. IF YOU HAVE ANY BAD OR ALLERGIC REACTIONS AVOID ANY FURTHER CONSUMPTION. NEVER PUT ANY PLANT INTO YOUR MOUTH UNLESS ABSOLUTELY 100% CERTAIN OF ITS IDENTIFICATION AND EDIBILITY.

## 'Essential' THISTLES

Thistles are time-consuming to prepare - more a labour of love than anything else - but if you want to experiment with wild foods then... Thistles also happen to be generally plentiful in the wilderness larder and therefore a handy ingredient. NOT all thistles ARE edible but parts of those listed overleaf, and mentioned in the Introduction, are generally accepted as 'edible' by authorities on foraging. *It's essential that ALL prickles are removed from thistles as they will do serious damage to your insides! And DO test your tolerance before eating in quantity.*

Unless you have a really large specimen, and by the same token older and potentially more bitter, thistle leaves really don't provide much in the way of greens after the prickles have been removed. However, that bitterness can be reduced through soaking and boiling. As the season goes on the thistle leaves and stems can take on bitterness [and also become tougher], so you may need to parboil before use. Simply adjust the recipes to suit the circumstances you face.

Neither is bitterness present in every part of thistle leaves. For example, in the winter rosette of the spear thistle the leaf green may be bitter-ish but the main leaf mid ribs are succulent and quite bland. The roots too, are bland.

The stems, stalks and roots of thistles seem generally to discolour once exposed to the air. So after peeling place in water, acidulated if possible, and keep the pieces submerged. For this reason the author finds that with thistle stems it is best to peel almost at the last moment and then slice off the darkened stem ends that were exposed to air.

As for thistle roots, these are really about adding texture since they are generally bland taste-wise, and are usually best before the plant flowers. Some survival experts quote thistle roots as being edible raw, however it is the author's opinion that for basic everyday eating they are best cooked. Experience seems to show that, like burdock root, they get tougher with a harsh boiling, but may be tenderised through simmering. Where used in combination with leaves the roots will need pre-preparing so that leaves don't turn to mush before the roots cook through.

The author has preferred ways of dealing with thistle roots. For main taproots, which can be a bit tough, slice thinly and then cut into julienne-type strips. With the larger rat's tail lateral roots, which

generally seem to be more tender, slice along the length with a sharp knife before cooking. In both cases, scrape the skin or rind off the roots with a sharp knife - or something like a clean pan scrubber kept specifically for this miraculous culinary occasion.

	LEAF	STEMS & STALKS	ROOT	FLOWER & FLOWER PARTS	SEED
<b>Creeping</b> <i>C. arvensis</i>	✓	✓	✓		
<b>Spear</b> <i>C. vulgare</i>	✓	✓	✓	FLOWER BUDS	ROASTED
<b>Marsh</b> <i>C. palustre</i>	✓	✓			
<b>Cabbage</b> <i>C. oleraceum</i>	✓		✓		
<b>Woolly</b> <i>C. eriophorum</i>	✓	✓		FLOWER BUDS	
<b>Cotton</b> <i>Onopordum acanthium</i>	✓	✓		PETALS	
<b>Musk</b> <i>Carduus nutans</i>		✓			

## THE PRACTICALITIES...

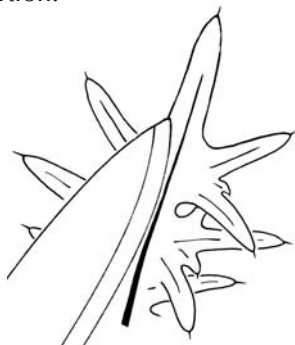
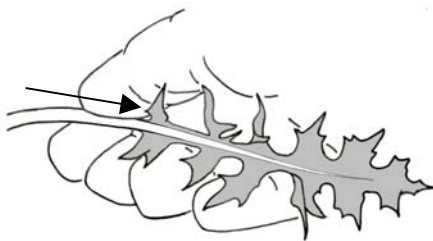
Acquiring and preparing thistles for cooking is something of an art, and obviously not a subject found in normal cookbooks devoted to everyday wimps of the veggie world like cabbage and lettuce. You have to tackle your foe with determination, and the first thing to do is protect your hands with gloves and your arms. For harvesting, a spade and a good thick pair of garden or industrial gloves are pretty essential - but not always as you will see. For food preparation the suggestion is a slightly less thin pair of leather gloves which are pliable but thick enough the stop the spines. Do not even consider rubber washing-up gloves.

When stems only are required the author suggests that you do not cut the thistle down straight away, but instead work with the plant standing and cut away at the spiny leaves going from top to bottom. For those species which have spiny wings it is now a simple task to take a knife and run or scrape it down the stem to remove the vicious defences. Peel when you return to base to prevent discolouring.



The next stage is to peel the stem of its outer skin which can be done with a handy peeler if the stem is strong and large enough to be handled. Another, more delicate - and time-consuming - way, is to take a knife and fray or cut one end at an angle and then peel off the skin in strips.

With leaves of spear thistle winter rosettes it is possible to strip the thick basal leaves - more productive when 8+ inches long - in situ. Reach for the base of the leaf stem as close as you can to the crown of the plant. Gently rub the stem there between your fingers to break the grip of the downy sheathing covering the mid rib and - quite firmly but not tightly enough the break the leaf off - stroke / pull towards the end. Repeat a couple of times and you should end up with a bright green leaf rib that looks like a little mini celery stick. Working round the leaf rosette you should soon acquire enough veggie for one portion.



If you are working with 'pre-cut' thistle rosette leaves place each one on a chopping board and cut on either side of the main rib with a sharp knife. Just keep the thickest 3 or 4 inches of each rib and discard the rest of the greenery. Simply rub a sharp knife over the remaining leaf rib to scrape away any downy material to reveal the succulent green stem beneath.

The best advice for generally tackling thistle leaves is to begin by cutting off the tougher outer prickles of the larger leaf lobes with scissors [or a knife]. Once these more vicious spines have gone it is generally easier to deal with the smaller ones on the inner leaf curves and which can either be nipped out between your fingertips or with scissors. *And, as mentioned before, it is essential that ALL prickles are removed from thistles as they will damage your insides, and cooking will not soften them.*



The next stage of any preparation process is to check for the level of bitterness. Just break a tiny piece of the leaf off and crush it between your teeth and taste. If it is unpalatable then you will have to follow similar routines as with dandelions - soaking or boiling in several changes of water before use. Obviously soaking in hot water rather than boiling in a pan will better maintain leaf integrity, while chopping the leaves before soaking will provide more access to the leaf's cellular structure for the bitterness to be leached out.

Thistles are generally best before they 'bolt' [flower], but obviously if you were in survival mode.... In the past dried thistle roots have been ground and used as a flour addition - something not yet tried by the author. Another idea on the drawing board is to shred or grate thistle root and use in a burger or potato cake. The author did this with shredded burdock root mixed with potato mash and chunks of ham, then fried the patties. As a food the latter is a combination which provides fibre, carbs and protein.

Consumption of wild plants is at the reader's discretion and own risk. For personal safety do not eat wild plants if you have a medical condition, during pregnancy, or feed to minors.