

Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Cirsium texanum*
Common Names: Texas Thistle
Family: Asteraceae, Daisy

Thistle Salad Wakes the Tastebuds

The last thing I'd consider about a Texas Thistle is eating it. Yet that's just what Delena Tull recommends in *Edible and Useful Plants of Texas and the Southwest* (1987). "...thistles provide one of the best wild salad greens and cooked vegetables in the state." Tull attests.

Humans aren't the only animals which eat the prickly plant. Painted Lady butterflies use it as food for their larvae. White-tail deer browse young flowerbuds.

Tull gives detailed recipes on harvesting and preparing the young leaves and fleshy root. She recommends them raw in salads and cooked as greens. The job of clipping off the spines sounds dangerous for the coordination-challenged. According to Tull, "Sensitive persons can suffer dermatitis from the prickles and hairs." No kidding!

Bull Thistle, native to Eurasia, has given a bad name to all thistles as invaders. Bull Thistle doesn't seem to be a problem in our area. If it becomes a pest, I recommend following Delena's advice and eating it. The younger the plant, the better it tastes. She says the fleshy taproot is especially tasty and compares the taste to artichoke. It probably tastes best if somebody else cooks it.

In some areas, Texas Thistle is also considered to be a pest species. Locally, I've never found it occurring in large stands. In fact, I've had to work pretty hard at finding seed to collect. Ms. Tull also notes that several species of Thistle which occur elsewhere in Texas are rare and should not be disturbed.

Texas Thistle is native to this area, to most of the state, and to Oklahoma and Mexico. It brightens roadsides amongst other wildflowers. Texas Thistle has an advantage over many other posies. It's about as tall as the guinea grass which has overtaken places where wildflowers formerly beautified our roadsides.

The purple bloom of Texas Thistle, like all other composite flowers, is actually hundreds of flowers growing tightly together. Many composites have outer petals of the "he loves me, he loves me not" variety. Those petals are "ray" flowers.

The dense central disc of composites is actually hundreds of "disc" flowers. Texas Thistle has only disc flowers, which we notice as purple and threadlike. Each is complete, having male and female parts.

The result is bountiful pollen and nectar for visiting insects. Thistles offer a good opportunity for butterfly-watching and photography. They range in color from pink and purple to lovely shades of rose.

Once fertilized and mature, thistle seed heads attract a number of seed-eating birds. Rio Grande Turkeys also eat Thistle seed.

The Black-Backed form of the Lesser Goldfinch is especially fond of it. They also use the downy fluff attached to each seed as a lining for their nest. A stand of mature Texas Thistle is a great place to look for these shy birds.

Ornithologist Dr. Tim Brush of UTPA-Edinburg has studied distribution and nesting patterns of the small and brightly-colored black and yellow Lesser Goldfinch. He believes this



species is beginning to nest and to live year-round in our area. Just a few years ago, this small bird only visited our part of the world on the way to somewhere else.



Texas Thistle is a warm-season perennial. Once established, it should reappear every year in spring. Look for blooms on roadsides and in open fields throughout spring and summer.

A similar bloom on a tall and spineless plant is that of American Basket Flower, Thornless Thistle, *Centaurea americana*. Equal in beauty to Texas Thistle, this plant would be more suitable where spines are inappropriate. Seed is available from www.nativeamericanseed.com.

According to that source, this annual bloom is great for bouquets and dried arrangements. Thornless Thistle is also native to most of Texas, including the LRGV.

John & Gloria Tveten include *Centauria americana* in *Wildflowers of Houston & Southeast Texas*, 1993. They include a photograph and apt description of the flower-bud. It is enclosed by elaborately-dissected golden bracts, thus the common name Basket Flower.

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