

Smooth Sow-thistle

SONCHUS OLERACEUS



HABITAT

Waste ground, waysides, and cultivated ground.

PARTS USED

Leaves, and possibly roots.

There are several sow-thistles - the Smooth Sow-thistle / Milk-thistle* or *Sonchus oleraceus*, the Prickly Sow-thistle / Spiny Milk-thistle, *Sonchus asper*, and also a Perennial Sow-thistle / Field Milk-thistle, *S. arvensis*. The leaves of all are potentially edible. In the author's experience the smooth sow-thistle is the one which is most palatable - the leaves of some specimens have turned out to be not overly bitter, but others more so. [* Not to be confused with the Milk Thistle proper, *Silybum marianum*, which also has edible parts].

The Smooth sow-thistle is available for most of the year. Very young springtime leaves can be used as a winter salad, while slightly older ones leaves should be cooked like spinach, or mixed with other pot-herbs, or added to soups. Smooth sow-thistle is quite easy to raise from seed should you wish to grow in more controlled conditions. One foraging authority reports that the roots of some sow-thistles may be eaten, however this remains untried for my own part.

The Prickly Sow-thistle has much more spiny edges which do need to be removed, and is also more bitter (although swapping notes with one of the UK's top ethnobotanists recently he mentioned that while in the Poitiers region of France the prickly sow-thistle was nowhere near as bitter as in the UK.

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.

WHEN USING ONE OF THE WILD PLANTS LISTED 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.

BUTTERED SOW-THISTLE

1 or 2 handfuls sow-thistle leaves - young
Butter or oil
Beef stock or water
Ground nutmeg - pinch
1 tsp. flour
Salt and pepper

For this recipe the young 2 to 4 inch leaves of common sow-thistle [*Sonchus oleraceus*] are best and when the leaves are not bitter. Other sow-thistle species may need their spines trimming off and may be bitter to the taste requiring some preparatory boiling. You may equally like to try this recipe with the leaves of good king henry or fat hen.

- Heat some butter or oil in a pan and add the leaves.
- Stir thoroughly to coat the leaves.
- Add a good slug of stock or water, reduce the heat to a simmer and cover.
- Cook for about 5 to 10 minutes [the author personally likes a little crunch left in the leaf mid ribs rather than the leaves being limp].
- Add a pinch of nutmeg, the flour and some seasoning.
- Stir everything then add another knob of butter and melt into the sow-thistle over a low heat.
- Serve.

[Recipe extract from 'The *Essential* Hedgerow and Wayside Cookbook' - ISBN 0 9544158 2 5]

STIR-FRIED SOW-THISTLE & PORK

½-1 cup pork meat - shredded / sliced	Ginger root - grated
Light soy sauce	1 spring onion - roughly chopped
Cornflour - pinch	Oil
Water	1-2 handfuls smooth sow-thistle leaves
White wine or dry sherry	
Sugar - pinch	
Salt and pepper	

Sows? Thistles? Never! You don't know what you're missing...

With a few more ingredients required than the backpacker might carry in their rucksack, but readily adaptable to other meats with the basic stir-fry concept quite acceptable without the extras. Oil is really best for stir-frying, but if all you have is butter make sure not to let it burn.

- Begin by slicing the meat into pieces about 2 inches long and 1/10th inch thick.
- Set aside.
- Next, make up a marinade from the remainder of the first group of ingredients, using a splash of soy sauce, slugs of water and wine, seasoning and pinches of cornflour and sugar.
- Mix together well in a bowl and then add the sliced meat.
- Stir thoroughly so that all the pieces are coated and leave for 30 minutes.
- Heat some oil in a frying pan and fry the ginger for a couple of minutes, stirring to prevent burning, then add the spring onion.
- Stir for a minute, then add the meat.
- Stir-fry until the meat begins to cook.
- Add the sow-thistle leaves and continue frying for another 3 or 4 minutes, stirring to prevent burning and distribute the heat.
- Serve.

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