

Scotch thistle



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(*Onopordum acanthium* L.)

Scotch thistle is a biennial that can grow up to 12 feet tall. Plant stems are heavily pubescent and have broad spiny wings. Leaves are large, spiny and covered with fine dense hairs that give the plant a grayish-green, cottony appearance. Upper leaves are alternate and have prominent triangular lobes that end with a sharp, green to white spine. Flower heads are terminal, numerous and 1 to 2 inches in diameter. The flowers range from pale purple to red and have a series of overlapping very sharp spiny bracts. A single plant can produce from 8,000 to 40,000 seeds which generally germinate in late fall.

During the reign of Malcolm I of Scotland, Norsemen attempted to capture the Staines Castle by wading across the moat in their barefeet, only to find the moat dry and overgrown with thistle. The painful cries by the warriors roused the castle guards and the Norsemen were defeated. To commemorate this victory, the flower became the emblem of Scotland.

