

Newtown Road Cemetery

Plant of the Month

Sow Thistle

Sonchus Oleraceus

Once you have met this plant and know what it is, you will see it everywhere. It now flowers throughout a large part of the year and you will find it in the countryside on cultivated land, but also growing in an urban environment, It especially likes the angle where buildings meet the pavements and roads where there is very little soil indicating that it is very soil tolerant.



It carries its yellow flowers on branching stems up to a meter or more tall. These are pollinated by bees and flies and develop into achenes with tufts of white hairs, which enable them to become airborne when ripe so that they are dispersed on the wind or by water. Its name derives from the fact that pigs very much like to eat it. It also has a beneficial effect on hares and rabbits giving it one of its alternative names - Hare Thistle.

Culinary uses include boiling or steaming leaves to use in similar ways to spinach, the roots can be eaten when young and can also be used to make a coffee substitute. The plant contains many useful minerals, including phosphorus and calcium. Medical reference for uses of this particular species were hard to find, but it is interesting to see how related plants have been used in the past.

Records show they were used to procure abortions and were used to treat the plague, as well as having a powerful diuretic effect. Also recommended as a treatment for hangovers, warts, nerves and wounds ...the list goes on. Indeed, a, veritable medicine cabinet! However, the usual caveat "do not try this at home" applies here. These old cures can have serious or fatal side effects.

Finally, though, this plant has been thought to symbolise endurance, courage and the will to survive.

Joan Stacey

For more information go the Friends Nature Group section at
<http://www.fnrcnewbury.org.uk/nature.asp>