



Puha

Sonchus oleraceus

Puha, or puwha is also known as sow thistle or milk thistle (not to be confused with St Mary's Thistle, also called milk thistle). Most people consider this herb a 'weed', but they don't know what a

wonderful food and medicine it is! It's a member of the Asteraceae family (previously known as Compositae) and originates in Europe and Asia, this herb as spread to most lands, including New Zealand.

(Image from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:46_Sonchus_oleraceus.jpg)

Identification & Cultivation

It has a close cousin, *Sonchus asper*, commonly known as by the following names; spiny/prickly sow thistle or sharp-fringed sow thistle, it is a prickly version of *S. oleraceus*. It is introduced, as is *S. asper*. The species native to NZ is *S. kirkii*, a biennial-perennial, which is more bitter than *S. oleraceus*.

They all contain milky sap and have similar bright yellow composite flowers, which bloom from spring to late summer mostly, followed by 'parachute-like seeds'. The foliage of *S. oleraceus* is a dusky blue green, though the new shoots are a brighter green and the main stems are hollow.

Propagation is by seed; maybe the wind has blown some seed into your place? It prefers to grow in full sun, but can grow in most soils or positions.

Parts Used: Leaves, new shoots, flower buds and sap (topically).

Harvesting: Generally from early spring to midsummer, it gets bitterer into autumn. It does often respond to a prune in autumn, which prolongs its harvest time.

Energetic Character: Bitter, salty, mildly astringent.

Constituents: Puha is a nutritionally rich food, including; Vitamins A, B1, B2, Niacin, high levels of C, plus Minerals; calcium, phosphorus, iron, magnesium, manganese, sodium, potassium, copper and zinc. It also provides protein, some essential fatty acids, carotenoids, fibre and oxalic acid.

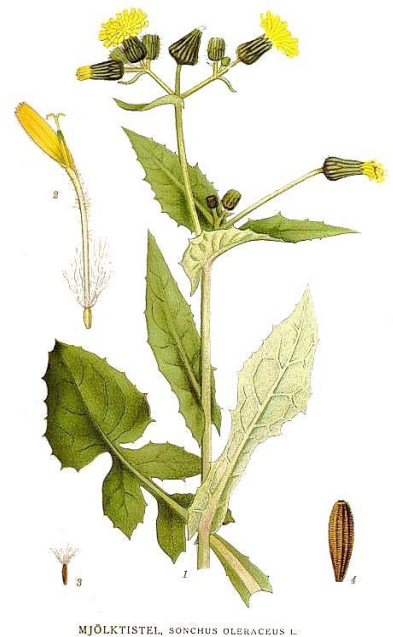
Therapeutic Actions: Nutritive tonic, 'blood purifier', astringent. Topically, escharotic (eroding).

Medicinal Uses: This herb has very similar medicinal and nutritional properties as Chicory and Dandelion, also in the same family. It is primarily used as a digestive tonic and blood purifier, to improve body function. Also, for treating hemorrhages and constipation.

Topically, the fresh sap escharotic, it is used to apply to wart and corns to erode them.

Dosages: When eaten as part of a meal, or added to juices or smoothies, you gain nutritional & digestive system benefits. If tinctured, take 10-40mls per week.

Culinary Uses: Pork & Puha, a famous dish! Apparently Captain Cook used this vegetable, boiled up to cure scurvy (vitamin C deficiency) affecting his crew. This is such a versatile vegetable; cook like spinach,



add to stir-fries, pizzas, juices or smoothies, or use in salads, including Asian-style, as this recipe from Anna Wilde provides. (<http://wildhealth.weebly.com/>)

Puwaha and Sesame Salad

1 large bunch of leafy greens such as puwaha, ¼ cup ground sesame seeds, 1-2 Tbsp shoyu (good quality soy sauce).

Put a pot about 2/3 full of water on the stove. Bring to boil. Meanwhile, wash and drain greens. Cut into 2-3 cm lengths. Drop greens into boiling water and blanch briefly (less than a minute). Drain immediately.

Leave for several minutes to allow excess water to drain, but do not squeeze dry. In a large bowl mix greens, ground sesame seeds and shoyu. Check seasoning and adjust if necessary.

Leaves are usually the part which people eat, and they are useful as salad greens, or cooked like spinach; blanching or boiling removes bitter flavour. In Chinese it is called *kǔcài* (bitter vegetable) and is a common ingredient. Pick the young leaves and stems. To further reduce the bitterness, scrunch it up either under running water or in a bowl of water, the cook or add to your smoothie. - A wonderful addition to quiches, frittatas or spanakopita, added to pesto etc, etc...

Other Uses: Apparently, Puha can be used as a dye plant, similar to Dandelion, use these mordants to get these colours: Alum – lemon, Chrome = gamboge (the saffron-mustard colour of Buddhist monks robes), iron = grey-green, tin = bright lemon, or experiment with White Vinegar...

History & Mystery: Some more folk names for this herb are; annual sow thistle, smooth sow thistle, milky tassel, hare's colwort, hare's thistle, hare's lettuce and swinies, there are more! Some of these names allude to the fondness of some animals! The sap can be collected and when dried can be chewed, like gum.



Its botanical names are derived from Greek; *Sonchus* is for hollow, *oleraceus*, because it is an 'esculent vegetable'. Back into ancient history this herb was used as both a food and as medicine. Pliny wrote that Theseus ate a dish of this vegetable before his rendezvous with the bull at Marathon. Culpeper (1616-1654) states that it is ruled by Venus and that *"they are cooling, and good against obstructions... the same nature of Dandelion, aperative, diuretic and good for gravel and stoppage of urine. Country people boil it in a posset drink and give it in fevers; some intermingle young shoots among their salads, like lettuce..."*

Mrs Grieve wrote that *"sheep and goats eat it greedily, but horses will not touch it"*.

For *S. kirkii*, known as puwaha, puha, pororua or rauriki, the Maori have traditionally used this herb to treat stomach

ailments (as a drink), as a tonic and for women during childbirth, to assist the placenta removal, with reducing the risk of haemorrhaging. Also as a general tonic for the ailing, for digestive disorders, also, for those afflicted with boils or infected wounds, and to 'detox' from Katipo spider bites. The milk sap was included in the 'ink' preparation, used for tattooing. The Maori Tohunga utilised this herb in some of their sacred rituals. A very useful weed!



***Advisory Note:** This text is given a general guidance. If any adverse reactions occur or symptoms persist, please contact a qualified Medical Herbalist or Doctor immediately