

A Thistle in the Garden

When is a thistle not a weed? Well, I guess when it's edible. Then what is a Cardoon? Well, it must be a weed when I grow it, because it certainly is not edible, never the less, it is a thistle. Related to the Artichoke - perhaps sharing a common ancestor or being the ancestor of the Artichoke, depending on whom you read - the Cardoon is in this county an obscure food plant.

My first gardening adventure with this thistle has yielded nothing edible, but has provided seeds with which to try again. Can they be grown here – that remains the question.

I followed the instructions for growing this native from North Africa, via Italy and France, but as it turns out, the plants require something different here to be edible. If you plant them in early spring, they mature during the heat of summer and are bitter enough to curdle your milk. The plants struggled through June, full of perky promise every morning but drooping like an over heated dog under the afternoon sun.

Unlike their Artichoke relatives, you grown them as annuals from seed and harvest the blanched leaves when young, tender and sweet. Problem is that warm temperatures make the plants bitter, another reminder of the subtleties of adapting a plant to the local conditions of seasons and soils.

Perhaps the next crop this fall and winter will uphold the gourmet reputation of this obscure thistle – perhaps if I master the horticultural and culinary challenges, then perhaps, there will be something new on the table, if not - there's always something to learn in the garden where nature serves a dose of knowledge and humility with every bite.

till next time,

Darrol Shillingburg
Doña Ana County Extension Master Gardener