

## A MIXED BLESSING

*Jean Rush*



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When, in a recent talk to the Lincs Group, Pam Tatam recommended *Silybum marianum*, a biennial (often grown as an annual) with the popular name of 'Our Lady's milk thistle', I was reminded of the occasion when one of these amazing plants turned up in our garden. As a baby it was delightful, and I nurtured it and felt pleased with its fine progress as it continued to thrive, its foliage strikingly marbled with broad white veins. Its promising childhood gave way to beautiful adolescence and, in turn, to handsome adulthood, with what seemed like indecent speed. After we had been away for a five-day break we returned to find a monster in the garden, right on the crossroads of our gravel paths. It dominated the scene but I was still

rather proud of this cuckoo in the nest. However, the sharp prickles of its leaves made it a decided hazard and, one hot day, the decision was made that it must go.

Mike, who was gardening shirtless and in shorts because of the heat, duly fetched the wheelbarrow and a large fork. In went the fork...a great heave, and one side came up; Mike manoeuvred into what seemed a more favourable position and went in for the kill. But the fight was on; the silybum retaliated, swung round and raked Mike across his chest and arm, drawing the first blood. Mike persevered and the plant groaned, losing its hold on the ground. With a cheer, Mike heaved it up, but blood was drawn once more as two large scratches were made across his back. Victory, however, was now Mike's and, bloodied but triumphant, he trundled it off to a neighbour's bonfire site, leaving me with the distinct impression that I was the 'silybum' for growing it in the first place.

A lesson learned - wear appropriate clothing!

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