Silybum marianum

COMMON NAMES
variegated thistle

BIOSTATUS
Exotic

CONSERVATION STATUS
Not applicable

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Herbs - Dicotyledonous composites

FLOWER COLOURS
Violet/Purple

SIMILAR TAXA
Erect biennial thistle growing up to 2.5m high and 2m wide; prominent white veins and blotches on spiny leaves which grow up to 60cm; large purple flowers are surrounded by spines and produce 50-200 black or brown seeds; seeds are 6-8mm long with downy hairs at one end.



Turakirae Head. Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe, Date taken: 26/09/2004, Licence: CC BY.



Turakirae Head. Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe, Date taken: 26/09/2004, Licence: CC BY.

GENUS
Silybum

FAMILY
Asteraceae

AUTHORITY
Silybum marianum (L.) Gaertn.

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

FLOWERING
November, December, January (February)

FRUITING
December-March

YEAR NATURALISED
1969

ORIGIN
Mediterranean, S.W. Europe

LIFE CYCLE AND DISPERSAL
Biennial or annual (dying off after setting seed in summer). Most wind dispersal is probably within 10m of the plant. Seed can be spread in hay, by water, in mud, agricultural produce and grain, on machinery or animals.

ENVIRONMENTAL WEED (2024)
This plant is named in a list of 386 environmental weeds in New Zealand 2024 prepared by DOC. 759 candidate species were considered for inclusion on this new comprehensive list of environmental weeds in New Zealand. The species considered were drawn from published lists of weed species, lists of plants that must be reported or managed by law if observed, existing national and regional programmes and agreements for pest management, and species already managed by the Department of Conservation (DOC). Candidate species were then assessed to see if they were fully naturalised and whether they have more than minor impacts in natural ecosystems. Read the full report here.

NVS CODE
SILMAR

MORE INFORMATION
https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/silybum-marianum/

PDF DATE
25 May 2026