

Praying with thistles: Good work in a wide field

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [June 28, 2003](#) issue

Every year around this time, the fescue pastures surrounding my home become suddenly colorful, as the purple heads of nodding thistles (*Carduus nutans*) break through the waves of green. As lovely as they are—and as much as the goldfinches love them—this is not good news, since it means that next fall's hay will be full of thorns. Feeding a horse a square of sweet-smelling hay with thistles in it is at least as bad as serving a dinner guest Coquilles St. Jacques with grits. It is a failure of hospitality, and a preventable one at that.

So every year around this time, I gird myself for battle. First I put on the thickest long-sleeved shirt I own, to protect my arms from prickles. My Dickies overalls go over that, with the legs tucked into knee-high rubber boots. Most important of all are my gauntlets—heavy-duty leather gloves that reach halfway up my forearms—since my combat with the thistles will be hand-to-hand.

I know other people who simply poison the plants, spraying a wretched-smelling potion on them that they mix from a huge jug of concentrate with warning labels all over it. The stuff not only kills everything within ten feet of it—fescue, butterflies, praying mantises and earthworms as well as thistles—but I worry about what it does to the groundwater as well. We drink from a bored well at my house, so there is a direct connection between what goes into the ground and what comes out of it. Plus, the thistles seem to love the stuff. They may sag under it for a season, but the next year they are back looking stronger than ever.

The same thing happens to people who mow their thistles. I want to envy them, gliding by on their riding mowers with CD players plugged in their ears while I am eating bugs, but I know that one mowed thistle blossom can scatter hundreds of seeds on the ground, and that even when the stalks come down before they bloom, no mower can touch the nest of roots from which next year's crop of healthy young thistles will spring.

Like most crusaders, I suffer from self-righteousness, but I know that the only way to get rid of thistles for good is to gird up my loins and wade into them, taking each barbed stalk in my own two hands and yanking it from the earth. The work is violent and physical, a kind of plant genocide that goes against my nature, yet every year when I do it I am given the chance to practice some things that I believe, as well as to remember some others that I have forgotten. Call it my annual contemplative prayer retreat with thistles.

When I first look at them, my heart thuds against my lowest rib. The purple heads go on forever. This is the same field I labored in last year. There is no way I am ever going to make a difference here. Then I remember the field in front of the house, where I yanked and sweated for four years before the summer morning when I looked out my window to see the field of unbroken green.

Even so, four years and all those thistles are too much to think about all at once, so I narrow my focus to one thistle, one moment at a time. When I do this, two things happen. Time becomes porous and every thistle becomes lovely. Each stalk has its own ecology, with spiders' webs hanging between the spiny leaves and honeybees parting the purple thistle fronds with their front-most legs. Every time I tug a ball of roots from the ground, earthworms catch the sun on their gleaming bodies as they dive back into the dirt.

This beauty does not stop my project, but it does soften me. These thistles are not my enemies. They have their own perfect being, as well as their purpose in creation. If I want them gone for my own purposes, then the least I can do is to acknowledge them before they go. Their lives are neither the first nor the last ones that I will require in the living of my own. I salute them before I yank them; in return, they remind me that my own day of yanking will come soon enough.

Meanwhile, no two thistles are alike. Some are clearly prehistoric plants that somehow survived the ice age, with roots so deep that when they come up they send me sprawling. Others are as tender as young asparagus, arranged in circles that mark the spot where a crown of seeds fell to earth last year. It is as tempting to ignore one of these little rascals as it is to dismiss a small sin, but I know full well what will happen. Give it a week of sun, even without rain, and it will be as tall as I am. Where thistles are concerned, clemency is always a mistake.

At the end of the day the earth is raw. So are the muscles in my lower back. A lone hornet is buzzing around looking for the paper nest that she knows she built between the two lowest leaves of a thistle somewhere, while the fecund smell of wet dirt and bruised roots fills the air. In a few days the huge pile of thistles will be dry enough to burn. Right now it is enough to look away from them toward the small, cleared space that I have made.

Beyond it, the nodding purple heads stretch out of sight, but I am almost grateful for them. They are my assurance that there will be more days like this one—with good work in a wide field—before the harvest comes.