



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

What is an Artichoke? (May 25, 2024)

by Nancy Hawkins, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener

Many people think of thistles as prickly weeds, and no gardener wants a weed in their vegetable garden. But the artichoke, scientifically known as *Cynara scolymus*, proves that not all thistles are a nuisance. Eaten by the ancient Greeks and Romans, this member of the thistle family has been cultivated as a gourmet food for centuries. Most of the plant is edible, but the portion usually eaten is the immature flower bud formed before the artichoke blooms.



This perennial thistle is native to the mild climates of the southern Mediterranean region of Europe and, thus, will grow well in the San Joaquin Valley with a similar climate. Here are some tips to help you get your own tasty "thistle" growing!

Choose the Right Location

Artichokes do best if they receive full sunlight (at least 6 hours a day). Plant them in an area in the garden where they are not shaded by trees, fences, or walls.

Prepare the Soil

Artichokes grow in most soils, but deeply worked, nutrient-rich soil will boost your artichoke harvest. Organic matter (compost, peat moss, manure, sawdust, ground bark) can be added to increase soil fertility. Organic matter also improves the soil's ability to retain water in the summer and to drain excess water in the winter. To prepare your artichoke bed, dig a row at least 8 inches deep and work in 5 inches of compost or other organic material.

Plant

Planting artichokes from seed can be a bit of a gamble – they don't always stay true to seed package labels. Root or crown divisions are an easier option and are widely available in early winter from local and online nurseries, as well as garden centers. With a height of 3 to 4 feet and a mature diameter of up to 6 feet, artichokes take up a lot of space. Plant your transplants in a row at 4 to 6 feet apart. If you plan more than one row, the rows should be 6 to 8 feet apart to allow room to easily water, fertilize, and harvest. Building the row up in a mound or with irrigation channels helps improve soil drainage.

Water Consistently

Artichokes love water. They need it to produce tender buds. As a thistle, the plant has deep roots. Water deeply 1 to 3 times a week, depending on the weather. Drip irrigation using drip emitters or in-line drip tubing works well to provide adequate water. Extremely hot summers can cause artichoke buds to open quickly into flowers. Mulching around each plant helps reduce soil temperatures and water evaporation.

Apply Fertilizer

Taking the time to properly fertilize your artichoke bed gives your plants the essential nutrients for a well-established start. Apply a balanced vegetable plant food throughout the growing season for healthy plants and high yields.

Harvest

The center artichoke bud matures the fastest and grows the largest (3-4 inches in diameter). After harvesting the center bud, the plant will produce side shoots with small buds 1 to 3 inches in diameter. These side buds are extremely tender and flavorful. When harvesting artichokes, all you need is a utility knife to cut the stem approximately 1 to 3 inches from the base of the bud.



Prune

Once the plant stops producing buds in the fall, prune the plants to prepare for over-wintering and next spring's growth. Simply cut the artichoke stem back to a few inches above the ground. A thick mulch of organic material will help to protect the plants from cold weather.

Divide Mature Plants

Artichokes are generally considered 5-year plants. Each plant produces off-shoots that begin to crowd the parent plant. To maintain a healthy artichoke garden, carefully divide your artichoke plants every few years.

Control Pests and Diseases

Common pests and diseases include aphids, cabbage loopers, powdery mildew, snails, and slugs. Most can be controlled by spraying with a 10% soap solution or hand-picking. Earwigs were my biggest problem. They like to hide deep within the blossom and swarm out when the artichoke is picked. Picking and dropping in a bucket of water causes the bugs to leave the bud. They drown in the water. Dispose of the water down a drain or onto the soil (make sure the earwigs are dead first!) Avoid using pesticides.

Some interesting historical facts: Historians believe the first artichokes were grown in Sicily or North Africa. In 77 AD, the Roman naturalist Pliny called the artichoke one of Earth's monstrosities. Wealthy Romans enjoyed artichokes prepared in honey and vinegar seasoned with cumin. In the U.S., artichokes were first grown in Louisiana in the early 19th century. The vegetable was brought here by French and Spanish settlers.

But artichokes aren't JUST a tasty vegetable that's delicious when dipped in butter. Artichokes are an interesting and unusual-looking plant when used in the landscape. If not harvested, the artichoke will develop into a large, light purple flower that looks like a thistle. The artichoke plant can be planted in a mass planting or used here and there in your landscape to provide an interesting texture and color contrast.

For more information about growing artichokes go to the UC Davis Vegetable Research and Information Center website and search for Artichokes. <https://vric.ucdavis.edu>

Enjoy your new adventure into the world of artichokes!

The Tulare-Kings Counties Master Gardeners will answer your questions in person:

Visalia Farmer's Market, 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8 - 11 am, Tulare Co. Courthouse North parking lot
Sat., May 25 - Go Native! @ Kaweah Oak Preserve, 29979 Road 182, Exeter, 10 am - 3 pm

Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30;

Kings County: (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m

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