

# Globe Artichoke



Large purple flower

Globe artichokes resemble giant thistles, have large leaves with pointed lobes, and tall heads of thistle-like flowers. They grow about 1 metre high and the large, silvery-grey leaves stand out clearly throughout most of the year before dying back in winter. The flowers are of a violet-blue colour and if allowed to maturity, can reach up to 20cm across, ideal for long-lasting indoor decoration.



The plants belong to the thistle of the daisy family, descended from the wild cardoon and were first cultivated in Sicily, Italy, in the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century and gradually spread over other parts of Europe and the rest of world. They took some time to become popular in Britain, then their popularity diminished until they were re-introduced in the 1960s. The Italian-born queen Catherine de Medici of France introduced globe artichokes to France in the 1500s; French immigrants took them to North America in the 1800s, by the 20<sup>th</sup> century they were being cultivated extensively in California, USA. Introduced to Australia by Italian ethnic groups, these hardy perennial plants grow well in many parts – including the coldest districts.

The artichoke as we know as a food is in its globular state (not to be confused with the Jerusalem variety, which is actually a tuber), and technically a flower bud of a thistle. These buds when in bloom are large purple flowers, surrounded by prickly appendages, as a thistle would and should have. When a bud is allowed to bloom, the ‘heart’ and other parts of the flower toughen, become woody and inedible. However, when the bud is very small and immature, the whole head is edible, later, while it is still in its youthful and compact form as a bud, and before it opens, it assumes the form in which artichokes are generally consumed – the swollen part of each petal plus the young heart or base of the flower. Eating artichokes requires a lot of patience, the bracts are picked off the cooked head one by one, then they are dipped in a dressing sauce, and their bases are nibbled off, when they are all gone, the inedible choke is revealed, scoop this out and discard it, the remaining (the heart) is the best tasting part, enjoy! Good timing... Fresh globe artichokes have started to appear on supermarket shelves (saw them at Woolies!), plenty of ‘lockdown’ time to experiment with this vegetable, well known for being tricky to prepare and serve as well as fiddly to eat.

## Anatomy of a globe artichoke:

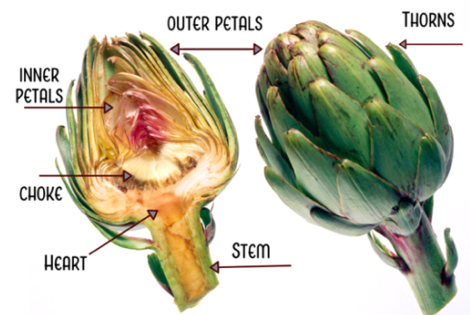
Outer petals: tough (sometimes very small edible section at the base).

Inner petals: more tender with more portion of edible flesh at the base.

Choke: the fuzzy hairy section (the undeveloped florets) which sits on the heart, not edible.

Heart: the tender and succulent edible part, sometimes called the ‘fond’.

Stem: outer layer is stringy and tough, inner layer can be meaty and edible.



## Growing artichokes:

They prefer a sunny spot with plenty of space and well-drained soil. The best way is by planting rooted suckers or offshoots taken from mature plants. Off-shoots are planted about 1m apart with roots buried about 10-15cm deep. Usually, they produce 4-6 flower heads in their first year and easily double in the second year. The first buds appear in late winter/early spring and continue through to summer. They should be harvested before they open, that is, they should be in the shape of a globe (that’s where they get their name from!). When harvesting, cut the stem leaving a few centimetres of stalk attached, this allows heads to remain upright when being cooked. Cut them back in autumn. Prune them in winter with 4 or 5 of the strongest shoots left to flower the following season. Plants can be kept for several years and each year suckers will form at the base of the stems; after that, they should be divided and replanted.

As mentioned earlier, globe artichoke – *Cynara scolymus* – is considered to be the ‘true’ artichoke, and the flower bud is the edible part; it is not to be confused with Jerusalem artichoke – *Helianthus tuberosus* – which is a sunflower and the tuber is the edible part.

Globe artichokes as a food: Globe artichoke consumption in Australia has been traditionally confined to ethnic groups familiar with the crop. This is most probably due to consumers lack of knowledge of the vegetable, difficulty in its preparation, and lack of promotion. However, the emerging life style that favours healthy and novelty foods has made a change. Artichoke hearts are now readily available pickled, canned or bottled in vinegar or oil, and are usually served as part of an Italian antipasto course.

Fresh ones can be grilled or baked, just cut them in half lengthways, remove the choke, have a slice of lemon handy to rub any exposed cuts to prevent discolouration, then brush with oil. You can also boil or steam the whole head, discard the tough



Scoop out the choke



Canned artichoke hearts



Jerusalem artichoke, tuber of the sunflower

petals, scoop out the choke, serve as a salad, or stuff with chopped herbs and spices, grated cheese, diced bacon/ham pieces, bread crumbs etc.

Apart from providing edible flower buds in the vegetable patch, globe artichokes, with their arching soft grey green leaves and huge vibrant purple thistle flowers make a dramatic statement and add structure and contrast foliage in the ornamental garden. The enormous purple flowers also make great additions to floral arrangement.