Artichoke Seed

Vegetable seeds represent one facet of vegetable production that, in some cases, covers up to 10 months. Grown specifically for seed production, these vegetables, including artichokes, are planted in early fall, and harvested the following summer. In Yuma, vegetable seed crops are grown within over 1000 acres and represent a $3 million industry.

Artichokes or "chokes" as they are commonly called, are a member of the thistle family. Artichokes are considered a sensuous vegetable, and the vegetable of the gods. It is believed to be loved by the Greek god Zeus. It is also a favorite of aristocrats and affluent members of society, dating back thousands of years.

The Artichokes we eat are the immature flower bud of the artichoke plant. The tender, young bud is called the "Artichoke heart". Artichoke hearts can be eaten raw or cooked. They are most often steamed. The heart, or center of the bud, is eaten along with small, tender outer leaves. The stem is also edible, and best cut an inch or so below the bud.

Artichokes are grown commercially in the U.S. and while they are grown by home gardeners, it is not a common home garden crop. While Yuma represents sizable artichoke seed acreage, artichokes grown for the fresh market in the Yuma area is relatively minimal when compared to other vegetables produced in the region.

The plant itself, an herbaceous perennial, can grow to a height of ten to twelve feet, though commercial plants range from four to six feet in height and spread to a bushy six-foot diameter. Each plant produces small, medium, and large artichokes, with the largest formed at the top of the terminal buds along the central stem; smaller artichokes develop on lower branches.

Direct seeded artichoke plants need a period of vernalization where must have 250 hours of cold (below 50 F) temperatures. Local area growers plant artichokes in the fall so that they experience these cooler temperatures, typically at night. The artichoke plant will then form a flower bud instead of remaining vegetative and will produce artichokes. Without proper vernalization, the artichoke plant will remain vegetative and will not form flower buds. Since artichokes can be planted in the fall and have a natural vernalization period, they are a great crop for the Yuma area.

Artichoke seed numbers approximately 800 per ounce. Artichokes are large plants that do not like to be crowded and are grown as an annual in the Yuma area.

Oil can be extracted from artichoke seeds. Physicochemical characterization shows it to be an unsaturated oil, having a very high value. The fatty acid composition showed a high content of polyunsaturated acids. The oil is used for making soap, hair shampoo, alkyd resin and shoe polish.

The artichoke is a relative of the thistle is a large perennial plant that requires a long growing season. The large flower buds are harvested just before they begin to open. These heads usually start to develop a reddish color when they are ready to be cut. Artichokes can be eaten raw,
but are usually steamed for a half hour to 45 minutes, depending on size. The petals or "scales" will pull off easily when they have cooked enough. In addition to the artichoke heart (the base of the flower) the thickened flesh at the base of the larger scales may be scraped off and eaten. The scales get smaller and smaller the deeper you get into the center of the head. The small undeveloped petals are scraped off, leaving the heart.

Artichoke blossoms produce an enormous and beautiful flower, and can measure up to seven inches in diameter and are a violet-blue color.

The artichoke was first developed in Sicily and was known to both the Greeks and the Romans. In 77 AD the Roman naturalist Pliny called the choke one of earth's monstrosities, but many continued to eat them. Historical accounts show that wealthy Romans enjoyed artichokes prepared in honey and vinegar, seasoned with cumin, so that this treat would be available year round. It was not until the early twentieth century that artichokes were grown in the United States. All artichokes commercially grown in the United States are grown in California.

In the U.S., Artichokes were first grown in Louisiana, brought there by settlers in the 19th century. In 1947, Marilyn Monroe was crowned the first Queen of the Artichokes.

Artichokes are extremely high in nutrients and very low in calories. A medium one has only about 60 calories and it's packed with magnesium, potassium, folate, vitamin C, iron, and powerful antioxidants. They're particularly good for liver health and can also soothe digestion.

While it's possible to buy fresh artichokes year-round, their best growing season is spring-summer-fall. The ones in our markets are usually either very large, the size of two fists, or else about 3-inches long, called baby artichokes (they're simply smaller versions of the big ones, picked while growing further down the stalk). Look for an even green color with as little brown coloration as possible. Try to choose ones with tighter leaves. As you pick one up, feel each to be firm and weighty. Finally, squeeze the artichoke and listen for a squeak. That's a good sign.

Here's the artichoke challenge: The fibrous outer leaves, while having a tender inner surface, are mostly inedible. No amount of cooking or steaming will make them fully digestible. The other factor is the inner thistle. An artichoke is a bud on its way to becoming a beautiful, but thorny, purple thistle flower. Once the artichoke grows past the "baby" stage, its inner core begins to develop a snow-white thistle. When you're trimming a medium to large artichoke to get access to the tender heart, you have to work inwards to find and remove that fuzzy center (it sits right on top of the artichoke heart, the prize for all your effort).

When trimming an artichoke you're aiming at one of two results: One, to trim the outside of the artichoke so that it can be steamed or fried whole. The other result is to trim the bud down to the tender heart that can then be steamed, fried, or cooked whole or in pieces (sliced or quartered) and added to a salad or cooked recipe. The exception to all this is baby artichokes which are far more tender than full-grown ones. This means that with just a little trimming and cleaning and removing a few outer leaves, the entire bud can be sliced or shredded, eaten raw or cooked.

Artichokes turn brown when exposed to air so before you cut, prepare a large bowl of cool water, big enough to take your finished pieces. Cut a whole lemon in half, squeeze the juice into the water, adding the juiced lemon halves into the water. As soon as you have a finished, trimmed artichoke, place it in the water until you're ready to cook it.

The ancients considered artichokes to have many benefits. Artichokes, including leaves, were thought to be an aphrodisiac, a diuretic, a breath freshener and even a deodorant. Extracts of artichoke leaves have been used as blood cleansers, improve bile production and secretion and to detox the liver and the skin.
Artichokes are nutrient dense, so, for the 25 calories in a medium artichoke, there are 16 essential nutrients. Artichokes provide the important minerals magnesium, chromium, potassium, phosphorus, iron and calcium. For example, that 25 calorie artichoke provides 6 percent of the Recommended Daily Value of phosphorus, 10 percent of magnesium, 10 percent of chromium, 5 percent of potassium, 4 percent of iron and 2 percent of calcium and iron.

There are 50 varieties of artichokes grown worldwide. A single artichoke is an unopened flower bud from a thistle like plant. Artichokes should never be cooked in aluminum pots. They tend to turn the pots a gray color.

Artichokes will burn unless kept completely covered with water while they are cooking. However, they are easy to overcook. When cooking artichokes you can obtain a better flavor if you add a small amount of sugar and salt to the water. They will be sweeter and will retain their color better. Artichokes are low in calories and sodium, have no fat and no cholesterol.

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