

Cynara scolymus

[Synonyms : *Cynara cardunculus*, *Cynara cardunculus* var. *sativa*, *Cynara cardunculus* var. *scolymus*]

ARTICHOKE is a perennial. From northern Africa, Canary Islands and the Mediterranean, it has thistle-like heads of purplish-blue flowers.

It is also known as *Actisô* (Vietnamese), *Agginara* (Greek), *Agginares* (Greek), *Agkinara* (Greek), *Agkinares* (Greek), *Alcachofa* (Spanish), *Alcachofra* (Portuguese), *Alcachofra-de-comer* (Portuguese), *Alcachofra-de-hortense* (Portuguese), *Alcachofra hortense* (Portuguese), *Alcakil* (Spanish), *Alcaucil* (Spanish), *Angenares* (Greek), *Artichaut* (French), *Artichaut commun* (French), *Artichiocco* (Italian), *Artičoka pravá* (Slovak), *Artischocke* (German), *Artischoke* (German), *Artishok* (Hebrew), *Artishok koliuchii* (Russian), *Artisjok* (Dutch), *Artisjokken* (Dutch), *Artiskokker Artiskokker* (Danish), *Artisokka* (Finnish), *Artišoko* (Esperanto), *Artyčok zeleninový* (Czech), *Carciofo* (Italian), *Cardo alcachofero* (Spanish), *Cardo común* (Spanish), *Cardoon* (English, French), *Cardo senza* (Italian), *Chao xian ji* (Chinese), *Chousen azami* (Japanese), *Echte Artischocke* (German), *El-kharshuf* (Arabic), *Enginar* (Turkish), French artichoke, Garden artichoke, Globe artichoke, *Hathichak* (Bengali, Hindi), *Kharshüf* (Arabic), *Kinras tarbuti* (Hebrew), *Kronärtskocka* (Swedish), *Latva-artisokka* (Finnish), *Qaqoc* (Maltese), and *Yang ji* (Chinese).

Warning – artichoke should be avoided if pregnant or breast-feeding.

In Australia this artichoke can be referred to as ‘cardoon’.

It is uncertain whether artichokes were originally native to Sicily or Carthage (which today would be in Tunisia), or both. Wherever, the artichoke is one of the world’s oldest cultivated plants. Artichokes were grown by the Syrians, by the nomadic Arabs, by the ancient Greeks and by the Romans.

The medieval Arabian physicians used the artichoke’s medicinal qualities, especially for treating liver disorders. In Europe the Arabs cultivated the artichokes on the plains around Granada when they occupied what is now Spain and Portugal (in 716 five years after their arrival they had conquered most of that peninsular). They also grew them in Sicily. (Apparently ambiguous records show that Charlemagne (747-814) ordered the cultivation of artichokes (or it may have been cardoons, *Cynara cardunculus*) in the Frankish Empire to the north.) Apart from this the plant seems to have made no progress through western Europe until centuries later.

The artichoke had reached Tuscany by at least the mid-15th Century and had acquired a name for itself as an aphrodisiac. Authorities claim that Catherine de Médicis (1519-1589) either introduced or re-introduced (after Charlemagne’s possible attempt earlier) the artichoke to France after she married Henri, Duke of Orléans (who was to become the French king, Henri II) in 1533. Because of its aphrodisiac label, French women were often forbidden to eat it (especially young women for whom it was considered unseemly). Nevertheless the artichoke became one of Catherine de Médicis’ favourite foods (on one notable occasion in 1576 she is said to have positively gorged herself on them at a wedding banquet) and this is said to have encouraged its further popularity in France. Also at the beginning of the 16th Century the plant progressed north across the Channel. It

was not only enjoyed by the English as a vegetable but it could also be seen gracing monastery gardens as a decorative feature. 100 years later Charles I's French wife, Henrietta Maria (1609-1669), had a large garden of artichokes cultivated at Wimbledon near London.

Joseph Pitton de Tournefort (1656-1708), the French botanist who was a professor at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris from 1688 to 1708, reported that at that time the French and the Germans boiled the flower heads while the Italians ate them raw with a dressing.

The artichoke was well known and popular in Britain from about the 17th Century through to the end of the 19th Century. Then unaccountably there was a gap. It was only in the 1960s that they started to be available for sale again there in any noticeable quantity and today they are generally treated as a delicacy still. [The immature flower, known as the 'choke', is discarded and the fleshy bases of the leaf-like bracts that surround it are normally the focus of gastronomic delight – but the tender, central leaf stalks can also be eaten.]

Medicinally, herbalists have used the leaves to treat digestive ailments, arteriosclerosis and some urinary disorders. The plant has also been used for some skin problems. In India the flower heads have been included in diabetic diets, and the leaves have been used in the treatment of rheumatism and fluid retention.