



David Musker and constant companion Merlin.

# The not so humble artichoke

THE ARTICHOKE PROVIDES DRAMA IN ALL TYPES OF GARDENS.

by David Musker of The Jindivick Country Gardener

**T**he Globe Artichoke, *Cynara cardunculus*, is a perennial thistle originating from Southern Europe and the Mediterranean. It grows to 1.5 meters high and wide with arching, deeply lobed silver green leaves that can grow to 1 metre in length. The flowers develop as large heads in the centre of each plant. If left unpicked they open to a bright purple thistle on long stalks, creating an almost Jurassic-like scene.

The edible portion of the bud needs to be picked before it develops into the thistle flower head. It consists of the fleshy portion of the lower part of the bud and the base, known as the heart. The mass of immature florets at the centre of the bud is known as the choke and is inedible in older, larger flowers.

Globe artichokes are known to have been cultivated in Naples in the 9th century. They were eventually introduced into England, growing in Henry VIII's garden in 1530. Henry

had great success in using the exotic artichoke as a lure for prospective wives! In the 19th century they were grown for the first time in the United States and today they are grown commercially in Italy, Spain, France and the United States.

Apart from food production, the Globe Artichoke is an attractive, hardy plant with dramatic leaves and a bright and large flower head that has made it popular as a border plant.

Today the Globe artichoke can be seen in many gardens and not just the vegetable garden where its size makes it less popular as a vegetable planting choice. I have planted it en masse in gardens and have used it successfully in formal plantings and informal borders.

It looks fabulous behind, and bordered by, low hedging, and is easy to place successfully



As well as being a tasty addition to the vegetable garden they are a great ornamental plant in the garden.



in a garden bed behind silver foliage or, for contrast, next to bright green foliage or yellow or white flowering perennials and shrubs.

When used formally, I measure exactly the centres of the plants before planting to get perfect spacing and then let the plants do their own thing, this creates a feeling of controlled chaos which is very appealing to the designer.

The leaves are so dramatic they are easy to use as a feature plant in most situations, remembering that they prefer full sun and some moisture.

They tolerate windy conditions and do very well in exposed sites. The Globe Artichoke is a bold plant that will make a statement in any garden, so don't be afraid to try this plant out. They are readily available as seedlings in most nurseries and do best when planted small, allowing the large tap root to form as the plant grows. Because of the tap root, large plants are not easy to move but, once established plants allowed to flower do seed freely and you will be able to transplant seedlings easily. En masse, if you have the room, they look spectacular.

Now there is usually a down side to great plants and I must admit that snails and slugs love the leaves that end up draped to the ground, but these leaves are easily removed. It is essentially a perennial, this means it dies down at the end of autumn. It doesn't disappear but rather loses many of the larger leaves that can be removed in the winter tidy up of the garden. The next spring your artichoke will be bigger and better than before. I presume they benefit from the occasional feed but in my experience they do very well with little care at all.

If all of this does not convince you of the need to plant this dramatic foliage plant then think about self sustainability and what you can do for the world by growing and eating your own food.

The bud, picked before it opens, can be used in many ways. It is a great addition to an antipasto platter, or as an entree dish on its own. To do this pick the bud when it's small and tight and to prepare for cooking, remove all but 10cm of the stem, cut out the choke in the centre of the bud and cut away about 1/4 of the scales with scissors. This removes the thorns that are present in some varieties. Boil or steam until tender. If boiling, salt can be added to the water to taste. Once cool, olive oil can be drizzled over the artichoke, lemon and pepper also add to the flavour.

## Baked Artichokes with Crab Meat and Sourdough Stuffing

### Ingredients

- 6 tablespoons of butter
- 1 cup of finely chopped red pepper
- 3/4 cup of finely chopped onion
- 2 celery stalks finely chopped
- 8 garlic cloves, minced
- 3 cups of fresh breadcrumbs made from crustless sourdough bread
- 8 ounces of crabmeat
- 4 large artichokes

Melt butter in heavy pan over medium heat, add red pepper, onions, celery and garlic. Sauté until onion is translucent, about 5 minutes. Transfer to large bowl and cool completely. Mix breadcrumbs and crab meat. Season stuffing with pepper and salt. Cover and refrigerate.

Preheat oven to 190°C. Cut off top third of each artichoke; discard. Cut off stem. Pull out yellow and small purple tipped leaves from centre. Using a melon baller, scoop out fibrous choke.

Gently pull leaves outward from centre until leaves are open slightly.

Pack stuffing into each artichoke centre, mounding slightly. Place artichokes in a baking dish, add enough water to a depth of 3 cm

Cover with foil and bake until outer leaves pull away easily, about 1 hour and 15 minutes.

Serve on a bed of rice or polenta.

Serves 4 people.