

Jerusalem Artichokes: A guide to growing and cooking

Contributed by cab

The Jerusalem artichoke is probably the most underrated root vegetable. It is easy to grow (too easy, it can easily become a weed in your garden), nutritious, tasty and versatile. Herein is a simple guide to selecting, growing, harvesting and preparing this excellent vegetable.

What IS a Jerusalem artichoke? Basically, we're looking at a tuber (that's an underground swollen stem), more like a potato in that respect than any other root vegetable. Unlike the potato, it doesn't contain much starch, it contains a different material, called inulin, which results in it being more slowly digested than a potato (and is responsible for the reputation of the Jerusalem artichoke as a somewhat flatulent food). The plant is really very similar to a sunflower, to which it is closely related, with a cluster of tubers just under the ground, penetrating to quite a depth. It can be eaten raw, having a nutty flavour, or it can be cooked in a variety of different ways; boiled, mashed, baked, roasted, fried, etc. You can do with them pretty nearly anything you would do with a potato. What variety to grow? There are fewer varieties of Jerusalem artichokes than there are of most other root vegetables, probably because it has historically been less popular to grow. Of all of the varieties available in the UK, probably the best (and easiest to obtain) is Fuseau; the roots are smoother, larger, and more uniform than the other varieties, without being any less flavoursome. Dwarf sunray is a good shorter variety, preferred by many because it has a thinner skin than Fuseau. How to grow them One of the reasons I'm so fond of Jerusalem artichokes is that they are incredibly easy to grow. Ideally, you want a good, recently manured soil, with a pH between 6.5 and 7.0. They'll get by in nearly any patch of dirt, but they struggle in really acidic soils, and if you can treat them well you'll get bigger, fatter, smoother tubers. Put the tubers in during Spring, once the risk of a hard frost has gone (I plant them in March). Plant them in rows about a metre apart, each tuber about 30cm from its neighbour, and 15cm deep. If you can grow them in two rows or a block, that's better than having a single row, because a thicker cluster of them will need less support than individual plants. While most of the gardening books talk about supporting them, in my experience that has only been necessary on exposed sites where they've been grown in single rows. If you get a prolonged dry spell, give them a good watering a couple of times per week. They'll get by on less, but the improvement in yield is worth the effort. Earthing up (like for potatoes) is recommended, but not necessary. If the soil is really poor, liquid feed can be helpful. Come Summer, they're going to try to flower. As it happens the flowers are lovely little sunflowers, and you can leave them on the plants if you like. You'll get more tubers if you keep snipping them off, though. Once frost has thoroughly killed off the foliage, cut off all but the bottom 30cm of stem, and leave them in the ground till you need them. Dig them up as and when you're going to want them, and they'll be fine in the ground all Winter (they keep better in the ground than out of it). I'm told that they can suffer from slug damage, they can get wireworm, etc. I've never seen it happen, though. The biggest problem is that they're ineradicable. Once you've planted them, you'll be digging them out year after year. Keep at it. Not that you'll eradicate them any time soon, but it's worth stopping them taking over, and if you keep at them they will cause very little trouble. They're not quick spreaders, so they're not desperately bad weeds. Some people recommend mulching with manure and keeping the same bed going, re-planting in the same place. Harvesting To get them out of the ground, use a spade, eased into the ground about 30cm from the stem. Loosen the soil, and lift out the stem. Pull off all of the tubers, and then go digging down and around for more; they go a LONG way down and a LONG way out, you'll find a surprising number of tubers that way. A really good plant can yield a good kilo and a half to two kilos. Cooking Jerusalem artichokes cook faster than potatoes; when boiling, roasting or baking, bear that in mind, and check to see if they are ready in about half of the time you would normally give your spuds. They work well in stews and soups; try adding some to a Scotch Broth or a hotpot, or to an Irish Stew. Boiling, Baking and Roasting Best boiled in their skins; give them a good scrub to get them clean, and put them in a pan of water. Boil till softened, either left slightly firm or completely softened through, depending on taste. Mussel and Artichoke Risotto (Submitted by Judith) Preparation Time: 20 minutes Cooking Time: 40 minutes Serves: 4 1kg mussels 400g Jerusalem artichokes 3 cloves garlic 3 shallots 150ml white wine 50g butter 2 tbsp olive oil 250g rice 800ml fish or chicken stock 2 tbsp marscapone 3 tbsp grated parmesan 1 tbsp chopped fresh parsley 1. Wash the mussels, pull away the wispy beards and discard any that are open. Put in a pan with one clove of crushed garlic, the white wine, 1 chopped shallot and half of the butter. Cover and cook for 5-10 minutes, until the shells are all open. Drain and keep the stock. Pull the mussels from the shells and set aside. 2. Peel and finely chop the Jerusalem artichokes, crush the remaining garlic and chop the shallots. Heat the oil in a frying pan and saute the garlic, shallots and artichokes for 5 minutes. 3. Stir in the rice and cook for a further 2 minutes. Stir in the mussel stock and a small amount of the veg/chicken stock. Keep cooking, stirring frequently and adding stock until the rice is soft. 4. Stir in the mussels, marscapone and parmesan, season well and serve. Jerusalem Artichoke Pancake with Goats Cheese & Salad (submitted by Judith) Preparation Time: 10 mins Cooking Time: 10-20 mins Serves: 4 375g rabinta potatoes 375g Jerusalem artichokes 75g plain flour 75ml cream 4 eggs, separated 1 tbsp dijon mustard salt & pepper olive oil, for cooking for the salad: 300g claytonia or winter leaves 3 Jerusalem artichokes, peeled & sliced chopped parsley lemon juice & olive oil dressing slice of goats cheese 1. Peel, then boil potatoes and Jerusalem artichokes separately, as they cook at different rates, until soft. 2. Drain and return veg to saucepan and return to heat for a short time until completely dry. Mash carefully or pass through a potato ricer. 3. Mix in the flour, cream, egg yolks and mustard and season well. Whisk egg whites until soft then fold through the mash. 4. Brush a heavy based frying pan with olive oil and spoon in the butter in 12cm rounds. Cook until coloured on underside, then either flip pancake over to cook, or place under a hot grill to brown top. 5. To finish, dress salad and add shaved Jerusalem artichokes and herbs and toss

together. Place pancake in the middle of a plate. Arrange salad on top and top with a slice of goats cheese. Both of the above recipes found it on this (rather excellent) site: <http://www.riverford.co.uk/recipes> Chicken and Jerusalem Artichokes (Submitted by Lozzie) Ingredients 1/2 pound Jerusalem artichokes, peeled 10 garlic cloves, peeled and halved 1/2 cup fresh lemon juice 1/4 cup olive oil 6 saffron threads 1 chicken, cut into pieces Salt and pepper 20 fresh basil leaves (yes, 20) 2 ounces pine nuts, toasted Instructions Peel the Jerusalem artichokes. Peel and halve the garlic cloves. In a large pan, mix lemon juice and olive oil. Add the garlic halves, Jerusalem artichokes and saffron threads. Add water to cover, and bring to boil over moderate heat. Add the chicken, season to taste, and cook 1-1/2 hours. Add basil, check seasonings, and cook another 10 minutes. Garnish with pine nuts, and serve with cooked rice. Yield: 4 servings Found at: <http://homecooking.about.com/library/archive/blchicken8.htm> Jerusalem Artichoke and Potato Pie (Submitted by Sean) Make pastry, line pie dish. Thinly slice Jerusalem artichokes and spuds having peeled them first. Grate some cheese. Fill pie with the above in alternating layers, seasoning with S&P and some fresh herbs (I like thyme in this, but then I like thyme in most things). Add some milk. Cover with more pastry. Egg wash. Bake for about 45 mins to an hour. Palestine Soup (submitted by Gil) 1 large onion 1lb Jerusalem artichokes 1/2 lb potatoes, chopped 1/2 pt milk 1/2 pt water thyme, bay leaves 100ml double cream chives as garnish butter optional extras 4oz hazelnuts hazelnut oil Sweat onion in butter, add sliced raw artichokes and sweat for 20mins. Add potato, milk, water, herbs and seasoning. Cook gently for 30 mins more. Take out the bay leaves. Put mix through a blender or sieve/mouli. Return to pan, bring to boil, add cream and serve with chives on. If using the nuts etc, toast them, crush and sprinkle on top, and drizzle on the oil also.

If you have any comments, tips or suggestions on growing or cooking Jerusalem artichokes, why not click here to go to the GYO forum or here for Recipes.. Why not have a look at the other topics while you're there?