

Jerusalem artichokes



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Question: What are Jerusalem artichokes?

Answer: The Jerusalem artichoke (*Helianthus tuberosus*) is a tuberous rooted perennial sunflower of the Aster family (Asteraceae).

The plant's underground, fist-sized, knobby tuber is characterized by its nutty and sweet flavor. The tuber is also called a sunchoke since its small flowers resemble those of its close relative the sunflower.

The stems are stout, pubescent and grow 3-12 feet in height. The plant bears many yellow flower heads in late August and September that are approximately 2-3 inches in diameter.

The Jerusalem artichoke is an American native through and through. Sir Walter Raleigh found Indigenous peoples cultivating sunchoke in what is now Virginia in 1585. Native Americans grew it for centuries as a staple food and, because it traveled and kept well,



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traded it among the tribes, and eventually, the settlers.

Through this distribution, the Jerusalem artichoke was planted and harvested all over the country. The explorer Champlain took Jerusalem artichokes from North America to France in 1605. By the mid-1600s it was widely used as a human food and livestock feed there.

Because the Jerusalem artichoke both tasted good and was easy to grow, it became popular in Europe, especially in France, where it's still a common menu item today. In fact, Jerusalem artichokes are more favored as a food plant in Europe than in North America.

Today some of the types grown are, in fact, French cultivars, such

as white and red fuseau. There are many varieties, but only a few heirlooms are extant and even they are hard to find.

The cultivar that is most widely available is stampede. It produces prolific clusters of white, fat tubers.

Other varieties include clearwater and golden nugget. Waldspinel, an Austrian cultivar, yields small, deep red fingerling type tubers. The name translates as gem of the forest.

As a food, Jerusalem artichokes are quite nutritious, with measurable amounts of several essential minerals and vitamins. The sunchoke is 100% starchless. It stores its carbohydrates in the form of insulin rather than starch. Jerusalem artichokes have almost no fat. Because of these facts, medical authorities strongly recommend it as a substitute for other carbohydrates.

They can be eaten raw or cooked and are a sweeter, nuttier vegetable than potatoes. Sunchoke can

be used in many of the same recipes as potatoes. Their crisp, white flesh is excellent raw, sliced into salads or served with a dip. They can also be baked, boiled, mashed or fried, and prepared in combination with other vegetables.

Jerusalem artichokes are easy to grow. They grow in almost any type of soil that gets at least six hours of sunshine per day. They thrive best in a well-drained garden soil with high fertility, especially potassium.

Plant the tubers in the fall or early spring. Plant the individual tubers 2-3 inches deep, spaced 24-30 inches apart. Since the plants can reach six feet in height, you should allow a couple of feet between rows.

The Jerusalem artichoke needs water only during extremely dry periods. The plants themselves can survive long dry periods, but the tubers will not develop without a regular supply of water.

The large, woody tops that resemble sunflowers should be cut off above the ground before harvesting, usually around September. Since freezing doesn't injure the Jerusalem artichokes, the tubers are best left in the ground and can be dug as needed.

Some say the Jerusalem artichoke is best harvested in winter, so the sugars become more solidified. A weekly supply can be harvested and stored in plastic bags in the refrigerator. Any tubers not harvested can be left to grow for next year's crop.

They are free from disease, highly productive and completely frost hardy. They do have a tendency to spread so they must be cultivated with care or they may become troublesome. For this reason, it is best to give them an out-of-the-way, somewhat permanent planting location that is a reasonable distance from other garden vegetables or flowers.

A good location may be along the garden edge where the tall sunchoke won't overshadow other plants. They are also useful to use as a colorful screen.

Mulching your Jerusalem artichokes is a good idea both for weed control and soil moisture conservation. A yearly application of rich compost can help to maintain desirable fertility.

Growing Jerusalem artichokes in your home garden can be an interesting and rewarding experience. If you care for your plants properly, you can obtain enough sunchoke for your family from a relatively small area for many years.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the Oregon State University Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.

Also called sunchoke, Jerusalem artichokes produce fist-sized knobby tubers that are nutty and sweet in flavor.

