

ORNAMENTAL EDIBLES: SUN-CHOKES

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One of the most beautiful, tasty, and easy to grow plants is the sun-choke or Jerusalem artichoke (*Helianthus tuberosus*). *Helianthus* is the genus of sunflowers, but unlike the massive, cultivated *H. annuus*, that supply sunflower seeds, Jerusalem artichoke is a perennial grown for its tubers. This native plant is involved in my earliest garden memories. My great grandmother, Mrs. Ruth Henderson, kept a patch right outside the back door. Helping her dig Jerusalem artichokes was a favorite childhood activity, even if I was too young to pronounce the name correctly.

Neither from Jerusalem or an artichoke, this common name is misleading. *H. tuberosus* was among the first American plants to be shipped and grown in Europe. Italians dubbed them "girasole" meaning the flowers turned towards the sun, a common trait in many sunflower species. It was thought that the cooked tubers tasted similar to the "bottom of an artichoke". Over time American vernacular changed "girasole artichoke" to "Jerusalem artichoke". "Sun-choke" is a more recent and casual common name, its curtness preferred by grocers and gardeners alike

SUN-CHOKES: A PIECE OF AMERICANA

A PERFECT COMPLIMENT TO
ASTERS IN AUTUMN



Sun-chokes begin above ground growth in mid-Spring. Under ideal conditions they reach 6-10' by mid Summer. Butterflies and bees visit the bright yellow flowers in Autumn. The 3" flowers are tough and withstand inclement weather and even light frost. Large plants in open areas can have dozens of flowers. Plants grown together for easy harvest usually have 12-20 flowers per stem. Sun-chokes are good cutflowers and their late blooming habit makes them a perfect backdrop for asters. The rich purples of smooth aster (*Symphotrichum laeve*) and New England aster (*S. novae-angliae*) are enhanced by the buttery tones of sun-choke flowers.

Sun-chokes are from mesic prairies. They appreciate moist, rich conditions in gardens as well. This is not a plant for shady situations, (but sunflowers rarely are). Given ample sun, moisture, and nutrients, sun-chokes become rampant growers. The saying goes: once you have 'em, you'll always have 'em. It is true. Once established, they are nearly impossible to eradicate. Every piece of root and/or tuber can grow into a mature plant. Tubers and runners are the most common form of spreading, however the seeds are quite fertile and capable of volunteering. Growing in containers will limit spread of tubers and allow gardeners to try the plant before making a permanent decision.

H. tuberosus is low maintenance and quite capable of surviving without any tending. During extremely dry years supplemental watering helps increase the yield. Adding compost or other organic matter will also promote more tubers. The best way to enrich the soil is to simply mix amendments with the backfill when digging tubers. This has the added advantage of loosening the soil, which makes it easier to harvest root crops.

Sun-chokes are rarely attacked by diseases or insects. The only pests I have ever experienced are voles and field mice that enjoy the bounty just as much as people. Even a small plot of sun-chokes yields more than enough tubers for gardener and critter, so they are not a problem. Begin digging tubers in October after the flowers finish. Remove the entire plant. Use a garden fork to avoid slicing through the tubers while digging. In a large clump tubers will range from the size of a walnut to a medium potato. All tubers are edible, but the fresh, large, undamaged ones will last the longest in storage. Broken or tiny pieces should be tossed back to grow the following season. Tubers can be harvested while the plants are dormant from mid Autumn to early Spring. Once growth begins in Spring the tubers lose density and flavor.

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They store best in the ground, so southern gardeners leave them in place and gather as needed. However, in Chicago the soil is usually frozen from mid December to March, so it is easier to get your tubers and store them in an airtight container in the refrigerator before the deep freeze. Although a pick-axe and a strong back make it possible to harvest in Winter, it is a tough arduous process often resulting in broken tubers and frigid hands.

Sun-chokes were gathered by native people throughout eastern America, and there is evidence that sun-chokes were cultivated in the Northeast and the Mississippi valley. Sacajawea apparently raided a stash of tubers from a gopher hole to feed the Lewis and Clark expedition. The sun-choke tubers resemble warty fingerling potatoes, but there is an important difference. Sun-chokes are starch-free and their carbohydrates are not converted to sugar in the body. The diet conscious and diabetic can eat sun-chokes without concern. The one potential drawback for the self-conscious is the amazing ability of sun-chokes to increase the amount and potency of flatulence.

Most varieties have light brown skin, but reddish types are common too. Sun-chokes can be eaten raw or prepared as potatoes. Cleaning the tubers can be difficult if they are planted in thick sticky clay. A vegetable or fingernail brush is invaluable when removing clay from a crevasse on the tuber. However, it is worth the effort as the skin is thin, nutritious, and adds to the flavor of most dishes. The only time we peel the skin is when we are preparing mashed or creamed sun-chokes.

Grandmother Ruth would pickle and can the tubers (that generation was proudly self-reliant) for use in relishes and other dishes. Sadly, those methods and recipes are gone. Today, my three favorite sun-choke dishes are: fresh field green salad with raspberry vinaigrette, roasted chips, and baked Cornish hens with vegetables. For the salad, sliced raw tubers serve as a substitute for water chestnuts. Roasted sun-choke chips are an extremely popular as a breakfast side or snack. Leave the skin on for crunchiness, and slice the raw tubers into cross sections creating quarter inch thick circles. Bake in a well-oiled pan for about 40 minutes on 375 degrees. Season to taste and eat while hot. In a dish with baked Cornish hens use sun-chokes can be prepared like red potatoes, except add them halfway through to avoid over-cooking them.

H. tuberosus is a hardy native that supplies a nutritious harvest with little effort. This piece of American history can satisfy the Chicago gardener and cook alike as an ornamental edible.

FROM THE GROUND TO THE
PLATE

