

The East London Garden Society

Plant Facts

Artichokes



Artichokes are a vegetable with the appearance of a flower, consumed for thousands of years as a medicine and versatile food, from *artichips* to pizza, dips, sauces and stir-fries.

Artichoke extract contains many properties that can help lower cholesterol, protect your liver and fight against such diseases and disorders as Alzheimer's, irritable bowel syndrome, high blood pressure and indigestion, to name a few

Folate in artichokes protects against neural damage in unborn babies, luteolin helps reduce the risk of inflammation and cancer, while antimicrobial, antifungal and antiallergic agents, including inulin, improve gut health.

Historians believe that North African Moors began cultivating artichokes around 800 AD. The Saracens, another Arab group, may have introduced artichokes to Italy, and the Arabic word *al-qarshuf*, which means *thistle*, may have evolved into the Italian word *articozzo* and eventually the English word *artichoke*.

The Dutch introduced artichokes to England in 1530, where they grew in Henry VIII's garden at Newhall. From the mid-17th century, artichoke hearts were a luxury ingredient in European courts, and some claimed they had aphrodisiac properties

You've probably tasted artichokes and enjoyed them in soups and on pizza for their zesty, unique flavour. But you may not be aware there are artichoke supplements, which are helpful as a powerful probiotic and antioxidant.

There are two botanical varieties of this interesting plant. The globe artichoke, suggested for culinary use, is *Cynara scolymus* and the cardoon is *Cynara cardunculus*. They're beautiful plants, depicted by artists for their interesting construction and vibrant colours, pale gold on the inside, with thick rubbery petals in shades of pale green, sometimes tinged with purple, on the outside.

If the plant reminds you of a thistle, it's because it belongs to the same perennial family. Artichoke history springs from the Mediterranean, with a surge in popularity in the 1500s after having waned following the fall of Rome. *Organic Facts* explains how the edible part of artichokes is the buds that form within the flower head before it fully blooms.

Timing is key in cultivating them, as they turn hard and nearly inedible once the flower has fully bloomed. Also, one of the most sought-after parts of the thistle is the heart, which is the base from which the other buds spring. It is often considered a delicacy, or at least the most delicious part of the plant, and is typically more expensive.

The fact that artichoke supplements are available, hints at the little-known fact that they contain silymarin which provides a more potent antioxidant action than blueberries, dark chocolate and red wine, per serving.

You've heard about artichoke hearts, which are very healthy on their own, but *Self Hacked* notes that artichoke leaf extracts contain more health benefits than eating the artichoke heart alone. Speaking of hearts, one study shows that the globe artichoke variety has a better balance than many foods, which is important for optimal health.

A myriad of factors, such as optimal and consistent hours of sleep, low sugar intake and regular consumption of healthy fruits and vegetables, can make or break your body's ability to fight disease. When you eat antioxidant-rich foods like artichoke, your potential for better health is improved.

Artichoke wears the crown for highest natural fibre content of any vegetable and over most grains. Many people are shocked to learn that a mere 120 grams of artichoke have over ten grams of fibre, or nearly half of your daily requirement.