

Artichokes are Fun to Grow

Giant thistle-like plants, artichokes are beautiful as well as edible. Their prickly-silver leaves make an excellent backdrop in any garden.

Whether you live high or low in the foothills, artichokes are fun and relatively easy to grow. Most artichokes are grown commercially in the cool moist climate of coastal California. Foothill climate is usually mild enough to grow these edible thistles as perennials, if they are cut back and mulched in the winter. In many places, with a little coaxing, you can grow artichokes as annuals, planting new ones each year.

If you want to grow artichokes from seed, you need to start them in late February or March indoors, under grow lights for about eight weeks and plant out after the last frost. In May or June, it is best to purchase starts from your local nursery or mail order catalog.

Plant artichoke starts in deep, well amended soil in full sun. Space them three to five feet apart. Since they can grow three feet or more in height, think about the shade they will cast when planning your garden. Mulch and water regularly.

By mid-summer, your artichoke should send up flower buds, which should be harvested before they open if you want to eat them. If you let them flower, they will produce a huge purple thistle which can be dried and used in arrangements. If you harvest all the flowering heads, artichokes may often send up a second crop of flowers in the fall in milder climates.

An artichoke will produce well for about three or four years. After that time, it is best to dig and divide it, as it produces off shoot plants that may crowd the original plant.

In the fall, cut back your artichoke plant and mulch it with a covering of leaves or straw. After mild winters, new plants will sprout from the old parent plant in the spring. Uncover them in April. Cold winters may kill artichokes, whether or not they are mulched.

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