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GLOBE ARTICHOKE (Cynara scolymus)

Globe artichokes are perennial plants in the aster family that develop large, sometimes spine-tipped, edible, flower buds. However, artichokes are normally grown as a perennial crop only in mild climates (Zones 7–10). The central coastal plains of California provide ideal growing conditions where frequent fog, deep, rich soil, and cool summer temperatures combine for plant longevity and maximum yield. With new varieties bred for annual production available, they are now easily cultivated for the fresh vegetable market in most climate zones.

SITE SELECTION: Select a growing location in full sun with well-drained soil and a pH range of 6.5–7.0. Since artichokes are heavy feeders, beds should be deeply prepared, with generous amounts of compost or other well-decayed organic matter incorporated.

CULTURE FROM SEED: Sow indoors 8–12 weeks before last average frost date. Sow ¼" apart and ¼" deep in lightly moistened soilless mix in a flat or pot. Germination should occur in 8–12 days at 70–80°F (21–26°C). As soon as seedlings can be handled, usually in the 2-4 leaf stage, transplant to 2–4" pots or cell containers and grow at 60–70°F (15–21°C) days and 50–60°F (10–15°C) nights. Transplant into the field 24–36" apart in rows 4–6' apart. Artichokes need a consistent and adequate supply of water to produce large succulent buds. Irrigation may be needed up to three times a week during hot and dry spells, especially while the buds are forming. Using mulch will help to moderate soil temperature, conserve moisture, and discourage weeds.

IMPORTANT COLD TREATMENT

(VERNALIZATION): When artichokes are grown north of Zone 7, they should be treated as annuals, and will require a chilling period, also known as vernalization, to induce budding. Vernalization is achieved by exposing the seedlings to cool temperatures, 45–50°F (7.2–10°C), for 10 days before transplanting. A simple method of vernalization is to time transplanting so that plants receive 10 days of temperatures below 50°F (10°C). Protect plants from frost as they are tender and frost sensitive. In milder zones, where winter lows are above 14°F (-10°C), sow seeds in the fall and harvest in the spring. Vernalization will occur naturally.

HARVEST: Artichokes are harvested with either a knife or hand pruners once the buds have enlarged but are still firm and closed tight. Cut at ½–1" below the bud. Plants tend to produce 1–4 primary buds. Once these are harvested, secondary buds will form on lateral shoots. Although smaller, these buds are also marketable. Depending on location and climate, harvest may occur from midsummer to spring.