



## Sunchoke Soup

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Introduction:

It's not unusual, when relocating to another part of the world, to discover new or unknown delicacies. Thus it was with us recently, when pale pink, knobbly vegetables started appearing on market stalls in this part of France. "What are they?", I asked. "They are topinambours", the man at the market replied. "You can saut? them with some garlic and parsley, or they make delicious soup. They have a slight artichoke flavour." The last sentence should have been a give-away but we remained in the dark. What were these strange vegetables, I asked our neighbor. "Huh, they're nothing special", she replied, "but they're all the rage now, even in expensive restaurants." (They had just had a special meal at a upmarket establishment where "topinambours" had been served, '? la nouvelle cuisine', as an accompanying vegetable.) "But we grew them as rabbit food. And now we can't get rid of them in the garden!" The mystery vegetable does indeed make a delicious soup - creamy and delicate, tasting very slightly of artichokes. At last, the penny dropped! A dive into garden reference books confirmed that what the French call "topinambour" is known in English as the Jerusalem Artichoke or, to give it its botanical name, "Helianthus tuberosus". In other words, a tuberous, perennial member of the sunflower family. The plant grows tall in summer, up to 10 feet, and bears pretty yellow flowers that can be used in floral arrangements. And, as my neighbour said, it does tend to become quite invasive. What's in a name? Well, Jerusalem Artichoke is completely misleading since the plant is neither related to the artichoke, nor associated with Jerusalem. That apparently came about as a corruption of the French (and Italian) word "girasol" (or girasole"), meaning sunflower. The plant does not originate in the middle east, but rather in America where it was common along the north-east seaboard, in particular Maine and Canada, and grown by the pilgrims as a food source. In Europe too, Jerusalem Artichokes were relied on as precious extra food during the second world war, when potatoes were scarce. Consequently, some older French people, who can remember having to eat them then, do not like them very much now. Like our neighbour said, "they're OK as rabbit food!"

**Growing Jerusalem Artichokes or "Sunchokes":** These perennial crunchy tubers originate from the Americas where they can still be found growing wild. An ambitious plant, the Jerusalem artichoke will grow 6-8ft (2-2.5 meters) high and take over whatever bed they're planted in so give them their own space. You can buy seed chokes from most online seed companies. They can be planted in rows or in beds with the latter being more common. Plant seeds in the spring 4 inches (2 cm) deep, stand back, and watch them grow! After the war, the Jerusalem Artichoke became unfashionable, although it remained highly regarded as a slimming agent. Reportedly, it facilitates the elimination of toxins from the body and balances blood sugar levels, thus preventing hunger and food cravings. Companies involved in health foods and dietary aids still market a range of products derived from Jerusalem Artichokes. So what about the origins of French name for this vegetable - "topinambour" (the same in German, "topinambur" in Italian and a close "tupinabo" in Spanish)? Apparently this is due to another mix-up dating as far back as

1617, either because it was believed that the plant originated in Brazil, home of a native Indian tribe known as the "Tupinambas" (later "Toupinamboult" and then "Topinambou"), or because the time of its discovery coincided with the appearance of a group of Brazilian Indians at celebrations in Rouen to mark the accession to the throne of King Henry II. But back to Sunchoke Soup. Two types of Jerusalem Artichoke are available in France, one white and thin, the other round and pale pink. Either one will do but both discolour if exposed to air so cover with cold water or cook quickly after peeling. Start off by peeling and chopping a large onion and sweating it gently in a covered cast iron pan with a knob of butter and a pinch of salt. Meanwhile peel and chop a good handful of Jerusalem Artichokes and add them to the pan. If you want a thicker soup, also add a diced medium-large potato. Continue to gently cook the vegetables, without browning, for about 10 minutes. Now add 1 liter of chicken stock (or vegetable stock, if you prefer). A shake of white pepper, a small pinch of dried sage, bring the pan to the boil and then let the soup simmer for about half an hour. Turn off the heat, allow the mixture to cool a little and then put it through the blender. Add a little water if you think the mixture is too thick. You should have a soup that is creamy in both colour and appearance. Test the seasoning, add salt and white pepper if necessary, and reheat. Now you can stir in different finishing touches, for example: a soup spoon of double cream (highly recommended) or a tiny pinch of saffron. This recipe makes 4 generous bowls of soup. "Bon appetit!"

About the contributors: The author, Gill Thompson, is a roving reporter for Kitchen Gardeners International. She lives in the Midi-Pyrénées region of France where she and her husband live in a charming sun-baked house with a lovely garden. Photographer, Folke Gønter, is an environmental consultant and an avid kitchen gardener from Lund, Sweden. He maintains a very useful gardening website offering information in both English and Swedish.

Preparation:

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