



Because Life Should Be Beautiful™

Cardoons

Cardoons, like their close cousins artichokes, are members of the thistle family and native to the Mediterranean. Some food scholars believe that the relationship is more than simply close, however. They insist that the artichoke was born in fifteenth century Europe as a result of cultivating a cardoon. Still relatively unknown in the United States, cardoons look like gigantic, overgrown celery stalks with artichoke tendencies, and they taste almost like a tangy cross between artichokes and celery. While the artichoke plant is prized for its edible flower, the cardoon plant holds the promise of pale, cloudy gray-green stalks.

A damp, mild climate is ideal for cultivating cardoons, and they are grown as a food crop in Italy, France, Spain, Australia, and Northern California, among other places, and primarily as ornamentals in England. Very cold weather is said to make the stalks tender.

Cardoon is a hardy herbaceous perennial to 3 - 4' high and 4 - 5' wide with handsome spiny foliage. For border or accent. Purple thistle like flowers in summer. Plant in the sun with well drained soil and average water. Feed in the fall and again in the spring.

High in potassium, iron, and vitamin A and C, cardoons are too bitter and tough to eat raw, but once cleaned and cooked, they are an unusual, tender delight. The stalks are dipped into the wonderful Piedmontese bagna cauda, a hot dip of olive oil and anchovies, and take well to frying, roasting, and making into soup.

Select bunches with firm, fresh turgid stalks, fresh looking leaves, and lots of available inner stalks. Keep in mind that the very tough outer stalks must be removed and discarded. So a good batch of inner stalks is important.

Place cardoons in a plastic bag or wrap in a damp kitchen towels and keep in the refrigerator for a day or two. They are best when fresh, and since they take up a lot of space in the refrigerator, it is wise to prepare them soon after purchase.

In preparing, strip away and discard the tough outer stalks. Using a stainless steel or carbon-stainless steel alloy knife, strip the inner stalks of any thorny spurs and fibrous stings, much like you clean celery. Cut the stalks as directed in individual recipes and, if not put into liquid to cook immediately, immerse in water to which lemon juice has been added to stave off browning. You will usually need to simmer the cardoon pieces in liquid for 40 - 60 minutes, or until they are tender, before frying them or using them in a gratin or soup. They are good sauteed with butter or a sauce.