

The Press Democrat
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ADVICE TO GROW BY » SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
Breaking out of the veggie rut



Freshly dug Jerusalem artichoke tubers kept in a basket. The “artichoke” part of the name comes from the flavor of the tubers when cooked.

Question: Every year, I seem to plant the same standard vegetables in my garden, such as tomatoes, peppers, zucchini, and cucumbers. This year I’d like to try something different, but still have it be easy to grow and use. Do you have any suggestions?

Answer: It’s always fun to try something new each year and we have several suggestions.

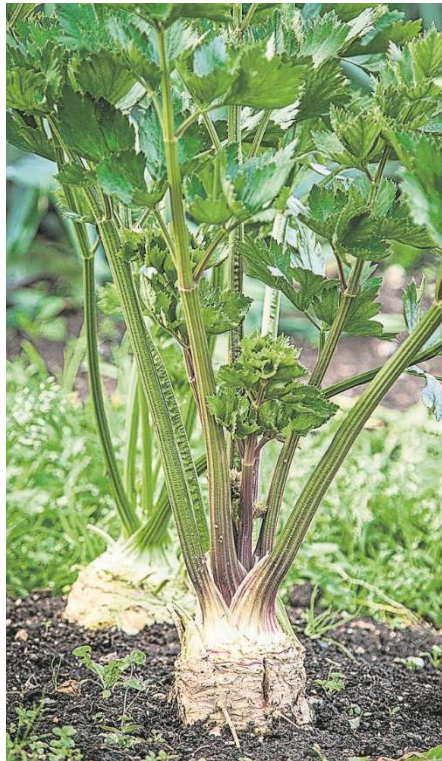
Jerusalem Artichoke, *Helianthus tuberosus*, also known as sunchoke or sun root, is a tuberous perennial in the sunflower family. There are various theories as to how this plant obtained such an odd name, as it is neither an artichoke nor associated with the city of Jerusalem.

The “artichoke” part of the name comes from the flavor of the tubers when cooked, which is like a cross between potatoes and artichokes.

When raw, however, they have a nutty, crunchy, slightly sweet flavor like water chestnuts. Plant your tubers in spring in a full-sun location. They'll grow into a bushy plant 6- to-10 feet tall and five feet wide.

They will grow best with staking. The edible portions of the plant are the tubers, which are harvested in the fall a few weeks after the showy flowers fade.

Please note that this plant is considered invasive due to the tubers' ability to rapidly spread, so we recommend planting in a container. For more information on Jerusalem artichokes see bit.ly/499z5Jr.



Celeriac (*Apium graveolens* var. *rapaceum*), also known as celery root.

Celeriac, *Apium graveolens* var. *rapaceum*, also known as celery root, is related to celery and is grown in a similar manner. Unlike celery, the 3 to 4 inch bulbous roots, rather than the stalks, are consumed.

Seed germination takes 14 to 21 days and can be started indoors with plants being set out after the last frost. This cool season crop depends on temperatures between 50 and 75 degrees during the growing season. Roots can be harvested in 150 to 180 days.

After peeling, celeriac may be eaten raw or cooked. It has a flavor similar to celery, with nutty overtones. For more information on celeriac see bit.ly/3OBSTwJ.

Cucamelon, *Melothria scabra*, also known as mouse melon, Mexican sour cucumber and Mexican sour gherkin, looks like a miniature watermelon but is in the cucumber family.

The plants look similar to cucumbers, but the leaves and vines are smaller. Their flavor is like a slightly sour cucumber, and they can be eaten raw, cooked or pickled.

Cucamelons are easy to grow, with no significant pests. You can start the seeds indoors or plant directly outdoors in a full-sun location at the same time you would start your regular cucumber seeds or plants.

Seeds will germinate in 10 days with harvest ready in about 75 days.

Since the plants can grow up to 10 feet tall, a trellis is recommended both to avoid slugs and to aid in harvesting.

Cucamelons have a long season and will produce from midsummer to first frost. For more information on cucamelons see bit.ly/3SRV81C.

Elephant Garlic, *Allium ampeloprasum*, also called great-headed or Oriental garlic, is related to regular garlic (*Allium sativum*), but is considered a bulbing leek.

It looks like garlic, but is larger, with fewer cloves and a milder taste. Elephant garlic is grown the same way as regular garlic, except the flowering stalk must be removed for the bulb to grow large.

Purchase your bulbs from a nursery to ensure they're disease free, and plant them in full sun between October and December, with harvest in May to June.

Harvested bulbs must be allowed to cure by drying them for a few weeks. For more information on growing garlic and Elephant garlic see bit.ly/48b94rK.

Salsify, *Tragopogon porrifolius*, is also known as oyster plant or vegetable oyster due to the unique flavor of its cooked roots.

Black salsify has a mild oyster flavor, whereas white salsify tastes more like asparagus or artichoke. It resembles parsnips in appearance and is grown in a similar manner.

Salsify is a cool season vegetable, so in our region it should be grown over the winter. Start your seeds in late summer, 100 days before freezing temperatures.

It has a long growing season and can withstand hard freezes, so it can't be harvested until early spring. For more information on salsify see bit.ly/4989Ebk.

Contributors to this week's column were Wendy Stern, Diane Judd and Joy Lanzendorfer. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County <https://sonomamgucanr.edu>, provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.