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Everybody loves the sunchokes

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Even after accidental mowing in April, the sunchokes are taller than I am. Seen here growing with goudi and tree collards. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

Any discussion of the sunchoke, *Helianthus tuberosus*, must start with its terribly confusing common name. It would be reasonable to think that “choke” in the name signifies an unpalatable taste, as in the case of chokecherries or chokeberries. But the sunchoke is neither astringent nor unpalatable.

The “sun” element is more telling. These tuber-producing plants are related to sunflowers and produce blooms with a similar shape but none of the size or seeds for which their cousins are prized.

They also grow taller than their relatives, topping out at 10 feet in my experience. Lacking the heavy flower up top, they make a fine trellis for vegetative (but not fruit-bearing) growth.

“Sunchoke” is, like many nonplussing names, the product of marketing. In the 1960s, the same produce wholesaler who popularized sugar snap peas and kiwifruit thought to market the cumbersome Jerusalem artichoke with the pithy label of sunchoke.

The story of Frieda Caplan is a worthy topic for a future column because anyone practicing permaculture with a mind to sell their produce could learn from her adventures in marketing.

She was struggling to popularize a vegetable that had also been commonly known as the Jerusalem artichoke (neither from Jerusalem, perhaps a corruption of the Italian “girasole” nor an artichoke) or topinambur (used in seven languages other than English). I think it beats those as well as the less-common “earth apple” or “sunroot,” and the usage consensus in the health-food community has favored sunchoke for some time.

This truncated account of the sunchoke’s path into our understanding must suffice for now. Starting with its cultivation by native peoples in the central United States, it has become naturalized throughout the country and distributed worldwide.

I have grown sunchokes in New York and on Harstine Island. They are an extremely forgiving crop with many food uses for critters, domesticated and wild. Everyone should have a little patch, which with — or without! — care may expand into a large stand.

If you have pigs and want to control that stand, “The Complete Book of Self-Sufficiency” recommends turning them loose on it periodically. They will enthusiastically root up the tubers and likely leave just

enough to regenerate the stand.

Further, the book's author, John Seymour, claims that as much as 80% of pigs' nutritional needs can be met by sunchokes: "Half a pound a day of 'pig nuts,' plus unrestricted rooting on [Jerusalem] artichokes should be enough for a dry sow."

Deer enjoy grazing on the foliage, which grows so riotously that even if weedwacked in spring, it will attain more than half of its full height and set plenty of tubers. Like comfrey, I have used it as a trap crop to keep deer away from my garden.

As for eating the tubers, I prefer to lacto-ferment them in brine. The result is so crisp and sour that it tastes as though lemon were added; think water chestnuts in citrus.

Sunchokes are rich in the prebiotic inulin, which encourages lactobacilli populations in a ferment. Pieces of sunchoke in a sauerkraut will help suppress the Kahm yeasts that soften the cabbage.

They also are delicious roasted or used in soups, even winning an award in France for best soup vegetable. Though they can be eaten raw, it's a much less popular preparation. Their abundant inulin can cause gastric distress, which has led to the amusing sobriquet of "fartichokes." Long, slow cooking or fermentation breaks down this indigestible carbohydrate, though steaming best preserves their nutty, crunchy qualities.

This traditional North American crop has a place in every garden — as long as it's kept in its place.

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