



THE ILLUSTRATED BOOK OF EDIBLE PLANTS

Staub
Buchert



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*The
Illustrated Book
of
EDIBLE PLANTS*

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Apricot

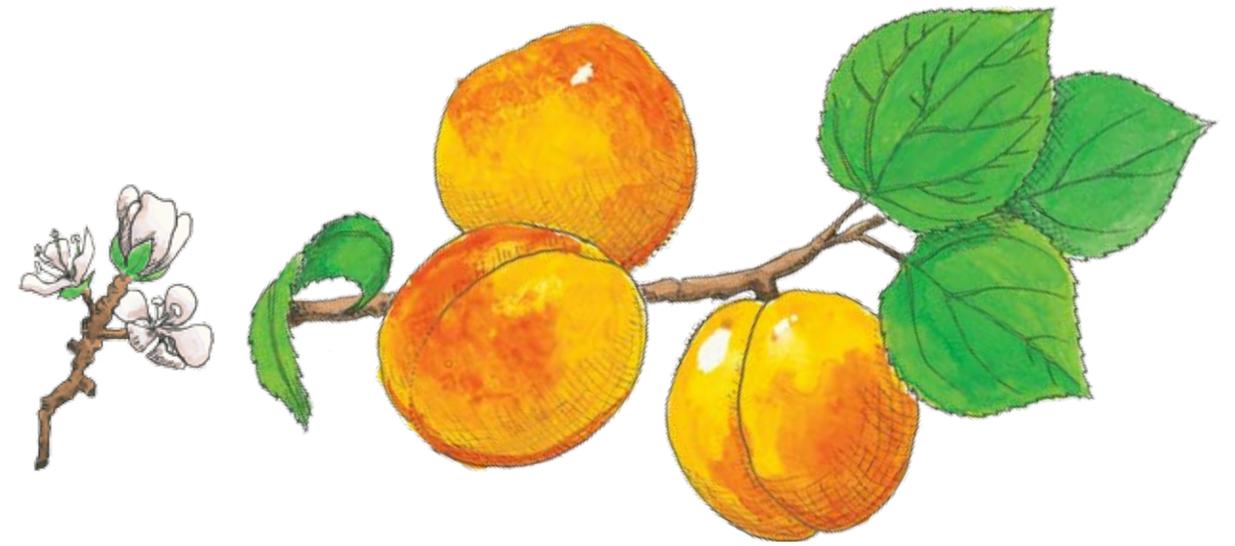
Prunus armeniaca

In ancient Persia, the apricot was reverentially referred to as "the egg of the sun," and in the Near East, where the apricot flourishes, it is respectfully called "the moon of the faithful."

Northeastern China has been identified as this sunny, sweet-fleshed fruit's birthplace, most placing the date at about 1000 B.C. A *Prunus* member of the greater rose family, the apricot subsequently spread throughout Asia, ultimately wending its way into Armenia (thus *armeniaca*) by about 300 B.C. Apricots, however, appear to be a far-flung and generally unsociable family, as every region of every country in which the apricot thrives seems to have its own signature cultivar and little selection seems to have taken place anywhere within the apricot genus until the nineteenth century.

The word *apricock* first appeared in English print in 1551, deriving from the Latin *praecoquus*, also the root for *precocious* and, in this case, meaning "early ripening." Symbolically, the apricot, along with the peach and other stone fruits, was an ancient icon of female genitalia; in medieval France, for instance, the word *abricot* was a popular slang term for "vulva."

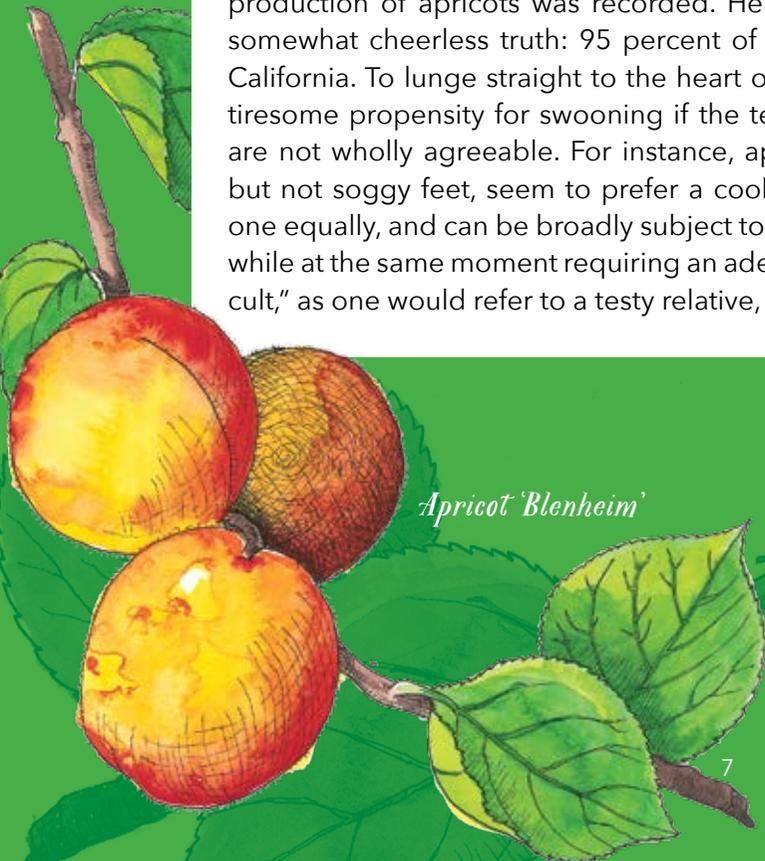
It was Franciscan missionaries who introduced the apricot to North America, and it was in the area south of San Francisco in 1792 that the first major U.S. production of apricots was recorded. Here, however, we come up against a somewhat cheerless truth: 95 percent of U.S.-grown apricots still come from California. To lunge straight to the heart of it, the apricot is a fruit plant with a tiresome propensity for swooning if the temperatures and climatic conditions are not wholly agreeable. For instance, apricots are keen on lots of moisture but not soggy feet, seem to prefer a cool, foggy summer and a damp, warm one equally, and can be broadly subject to loss of bloom or fruit by spring frost, while at the same moment requiring an adequately cold winter dormancy. "Difficult," as one would refer to a testy relative, I think about sums it up.



Apricot 'Rival'

Medicinally, apricot seeds were used to treat tumors in an astonishingly early A.D. 502, and in Great Britain apricot oil was used as an erstwhile cure for tumors and ulcers throughout the seventeenth century. Interestingly, the wildly controversial drug Laetrile, ultimately disproved as a viable cancer therapy, was originally derived from an extract of apricot seeds. Modern medicine, however, does confirm that apricots are an excellent source of beta-carotene (one apricot will provide you with 10 percent of your daily recommended amount), vitamin C, iron, potassium, and fiber.

Apricots are truly lovely trees: small to medium-sized with a dense, spreading canopy, glossy reddish-brown bark, pretty heart-shaped leaves, and positive flurries of pretty white-to-pink *Prunus* blossoms. Another positive is that most U.S.-grown cultivars are self-fruitful, so you only need to plant one. There are literally scores of apricot varieties, so if I haven't managed to dissuade you from attempting cultivation, it would pay to visit your local nursery and have them advise you about the likeliest prospects for your zone and climate. Although it can take 4 years for a young tree to begin fruiting, once established, a single tree can bear as much as 45 pounds of apricots a year for 20 years or more. Culturally, despite their need for regular waterings, try to keep in mind the finicky apricot's aversion to wet feet. Also, for optimal fruit size and harvest, you may want to thin your fruits to every 2 to 4 inches per branch. Our Viennese friends have historically plied us with mouthwatering apricot dumplings in season, wrapped in phyllo dough parcels and drenched in butter with a sprinkling of sugar, so here let me recommend that sumptuous recipe to you. Try to make two your limit.



Apricot 'Blenheim'



Artichoke

Cynara scolymus

In 1948 in Castroville, California, "artichoke capital of the world," Norma Jean Baker (soon to be known as Marilyn Monroe) got her first leg up in life when she was elected the very first Artichoke Festival Queen.

The artichoke is the edible flower bud of a large, thistle-like plant of the sunflower family native to the Mediterranean and Near East, its common name coming to us from the Arabic *al kharshuf*. The Moroccan invaders brought the artichoke to Spain in the ninth or tenth century, whence it became *alcahofa*, the Italians subsequently turning it to *carciofa*. The Romans were fond of artichokes imported from Carthage and Cordova for their banquets, and thought the plants' spines looked like the teeth of Cynara, the dog of mythological tales; thus this cultivar's Latin sobriquet *Cynara scolymus*. In the first century A.D., the Roman naturalist Pliny noted, not with great pleasure, that in his time the artichoke was held in higher esteem than any other potherb in Rome, further commenting that even donkeys were smart enough to refuse to eat them.

Elizabethan folklore held that the artichoke, introduced into England in 1548, was created when an ill-tempered beauty angered the gods and was transformed by them into a prickly thistle, a form more suited to her personality. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the German poet Goethe was, like Pliny, appalled by the continental taste for artichokes, exclaiming incredulously in his *Travels Through Italy*, "The peasants eat thistles!" However, in Scotland around the same time, artichokes were so highly valued that it was thought only prosperous men should have the right to grow them and that it would be impertinent for a lesser man to even attempt such a folly.



Artichoke 'Opera'



Artichoke 'Gigante'



Artichoke 'Imperial'



Artichoke Hearts 'Opera'

Like many antique vegetables, artichokes were prescribed by ancient physicians for all kinds of physical ailments, from jaundice and coughs to the faltering libidos of men, the French herbalists Estienne and Liebault coyly suggesting in the sixteenth century that a diet rich in artichoke extracts could cure "weakness of the generative parts." The juice, when pressed from the plant before it blossomed, was also used as a popular hair restorative. We know now that artichokes are packed with phytonutrients and are highly efficacious in protecting against cancers, heart disease, liver dysfunction, high cholesterol, and diabetes. In fact, in terms of antioxidancy, in 2004 the USDA rated the artichoke seventh in the pantheon of edible plants.

If I had to pick one major piece of architecture to anchor a vegetable bed, an artichoke would be it. The most refined of thistles, these large, neatly carved, almost prehistoric-looking buds grow to magnificent proportions on sturdy 4- to 5-foot stems amid beautifully architectural, deeply cut, silver-green leaves that arch fountain-like from the crown. The Italians have made selections of both purple and green artichokes since the fifteenth century, the purple varieties, historically, thought to be more tender than the green types. Our most common artichokes are of the round, green "globe" variety, the most popular cultivars being 'Green Globe' and 'Imperial Star.' The Italian 'Violetto' types, like 'Opera', are more elongated in shape and prettily tinged with purple. When grown as perennials, artichokes have a life span of about five years and are propagated in winter or spring from root divisions. In Pennsylvania, where they are not hardy, I pot up my plants at the end of the season and overwinter them in the greenhouses. To culture annually, start seeds a good three months before your frost date, vernalize the plants for two weeks when temperatures hover in the 40s, then set out after danger of frost.

Culinarily, is there a yummiest or healthier lunch than a cold, steamed artichoke with a bit of tarragon mayonnaise of a summer's day?

Chives

Allium schoenoprasum

"I confess I had not added these had it not been for a country gentleman, who by a letter certified to me that amongst other herbs I had left these out."

—Nicholas Culpeper, *The Complete Herbal*, 1653

Despite Culpeper's somewhat pouty inclusion of chives in his *Herbal* of 1653, I personally cannot think of a tastier culinary herb that provides such a pleasing and carefree show. Members of the *Allium* family, along with garlic, onions, leeks, and shallots, chives are the smallest species of onion and the only *Allium* native to both the New and Old Worlds, growing wild across most of the northern hemisphere, from Greece to the south of Sweden on the European continent, in Siberia as far east as Kamchatka, and broadly in North America. Chive cultivation in China dates back to possibly 3000 B.C., with Traditional Chinese medicine anciently recommending raw chives as an antidote for poison, and chives have been cultured in Europe since at least the Middle Ages, with many attributing their introduction there to Marco Polo.

The species name *schoenoprasum* derives from the Greek *skhoinos*, "sedge," and *prason*, "onion," which in Latin translates to "Rush-Leek." This onion cultivar's common name comes to us from the French *cive*, which derives from the Latin *cepa*, "onion." While in ancient Rome it was believed that chives could relieve the pain of both sunburn and sore throat, increase blood pressure, and act as a diuretic, they were not without their naysayers, the clearly wary Culpeper further asserting, "If they be eaten raw . . . they send up very hurtful vapours to the brain, causing troublesome sleep and spoiling the eyesight . . ." Therefore, chiefly valued as a sallet herb, even this usage was met with some suspicion, William Rhind reporting in his *History of the Vegetable Kingdom* of 1842 that ". . . they seldom find a place in the garden of the English peasant, who, partly from ignorance, and partly from prejudices, does not live much upon these soups and savoury dishes . . ." In truth, the medicinal properties of chives, which contain allyl sulfides and alkyl sulfoxides, as well as healthy doses of vitamins A and C and calcium, are similar to those of garlic but proportionally weaker. Therefore, while not wildly efficacious, chives can certainly have a beneficial effect on the circulatory system and in lowering blood pressure, as well as serving as an antibiotic due to their load of sulfurous compounds.



Chives

As noted, chives, with their tasty green stalks growing as elegantly as a decorative grass and topped with those lovely purple or white edible allium flower heads, are exceptionally decorative, particularly as a border plant for a vegetable or herb garden, functioning as both an ornamental edging and opportune pest barrier. Additionally, chives are positively lamblike to cultivate – perennial, hardy to USDA zone 3, and uncomplaining in sun to part shade and almost any soil. Chives can easily be grown from seed, but the best way to increase your holdings is to divide and conquer: just dig up a clump, tease the bulblets into several smaller clumps, and replant. Cut back chives after flowering to about 2 inches above ground, and they will reward you with new growth and another pretty flurry of flowers.

In his 1806 book *Attempt at a Flora*, Anders Retzius, the nineteenth-century Swedish anthropologist, describes how chives were broadly used in Sweden to add a green bite to pancakes, soups, and fish. I recommend chopping a bunch into a confetti, then sprinkling liberally over mashed potatoes, stirring into classic vichyssoise, or whipping into an omelet batter and freezing the rest (they remain wonderfully fresh tasting) to thaw at a later date when some summery "green" addition is all you crave.



Tomato 'Elberta Peach'



Tomato 'Tiger Tom'



Tomato 'Sweet Million'

Tomato

Solanum lycopersicon esculentum

When the tomato, or "Moors Apple" (pomei di moro), was introduced to France, the always up for fun French mistook the name to be "pomo d'amour," and so the designation of the tomato as "love apple" was born.

In the annals of vegetable history, the tomato must certainly claim the crown as the edible plant with the most dramatic gastronomic turnaround, for although it was viciously maligned by a host of cultures, including our own, well into the nineteenth century, the tomato now stands as the single most popular vegetable in current Western culture.

It originated spontaneously in the coastal highlands of western South America and small, scruffy wild tomatoes can still be found growing in the seaside mountains of Peru, Chile, and Ecuador. The wild tomato was a simple two-celled creature until a friendly genetic mutation occurred, resulting in the large, lobed, multi-celled fruit with which we are now so familiar. Tomatoes were delivered to the European continent by the homeward-bound Spanish conquistadors in the fifteenth century, but as members of the always-suspect Solanum or nightshade family, they were promptly given the designation of "wolf's peach," or Lycopersicon, the name given to an unknown and perhaps mythical fruit by the second century A.D. Greek physician Galen, as nightshades were legendarily linked to werewolves. The tomato-bashing continued in 1544, when the Italian herbalist Pietro Andrae Matthioli referred to the new import as

mala aurea, or "bad golden thing," and the English herbalist John Gerard, who planted them in the College of Physicians gardens in Holborne in 1590, concluded that "the whole plant" was possessed "of ranke and stinking savour." Karl Linnaeus managed to add the *esculentum*, meaning "edible," in the eighteenth century, although this was an issue still clearly up for debate.

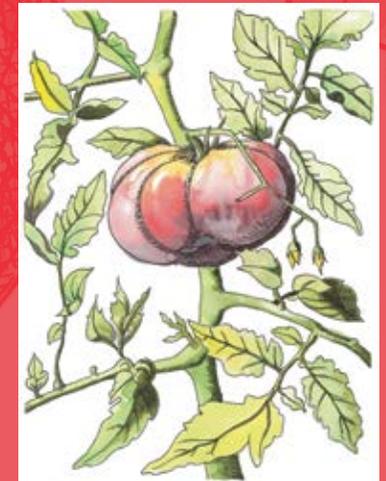
North America, which bizarrely only welcomed the tomato when it was introduced from Europe in the eighteenth century, had much the same reaction, Joseph T. Buckingham, early-nineteenth-century editor of the *Boston Courier*, calling the tomato "the mere fungus of an offensive plant, which one cannot touch without an immediate application of soap and water . . ." and even as late as 1836, S. D. Wilcox, editor of the *Florida Agriculturist*, pronounced his first tomato "an arrant humbug" that "deserved forthwith to be consigned to the tomb of all the Capulets." Of course, we now know that America's favorite edible plant to know and grow is swooningly delicious at its best as well as an excellent source of vitamins A and C, lycopene, magnesium, and iron.



Tomato 'German Red Strawberry'



Tomato 'Green Zebra'



Tomato 'Purple Calabash'

Tomatoes come in a huge variety of sizes, shapes, and colorations, ranging from currant-sized to 2-pound mammoths, round to "ox-hearted" to totally misshapen, black, dark purple, and red to orange, yellow, green, and white, ribbed or lobed or both, so I will again here serve you up some of our favorites on the farm. Notable among these are the brawny, bi-colored beefsteak 'Hillbilly', the super sweet cherries 'SunGold' and 'Sweet Million', that Moby Dick of tomatoes 'Great White', the prettily striated types 'Green Zebra' and 'Tiger Tom', the lycopene-rich Russian "blacks" like 'Black From Tula', and 'Black Krim', and the whole heirloom 'Brandywine' family. Tomatoes are a fairly long-season idea, so start in the greenhouse in 4-inch pots 4 to 6 weeks before last frost, then plant deeply (right up to their necks to promote a good root system) in a well-composted, sunny spot when soil temperature is above 60 degrees, and harvest in about 80 to 90 days from transplant.

Why not coarse-chop a few of any variety and toss with chopped fresh mint, crumbled blue cheese, and a lemony vinaigrette for a nice variation on a classic Caprese salad?