

Chicory

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Cuisine Conscious? Choose Chicory.

Perhaps it is the ease with which we are able to grow salad vegetables and winter greens that have limited our culinary appreciation of chicory. But in an increasingly cuisine conscious society, more people are developing an understanding and appreciation of this remarkable ancient plant.

FACT FILE

Common Name: *Chicory*

Botanical Name: *Cichorium intybus*

Family: *Asteraceae*

Origin: *Europe and Asia*

Description: *Chicory is a perennial herb with a dandelion-like taproot. In wild strains, the foliage forms a rosette of deeply lobed leaves. These become progressively clasping and lance-shaped further up the rigid flower stems. Each plant bears several branched flower stalks up to 2m high that are topped with attractive, cornflower-blue daisies. The flowers occur singly or in groups of two or three and grow 15-20cm in diameter. Plants may be grown for purely ornamental purposes or cultivated as annuals or short-lived perennials for their leaf and/or root harvest.*

Some cultures revere slightly bitter foods like chicory for their medicinal values. Chicory is reported to boost the immune system, improve organ function and digestion as well as help lower cholesterol and blood sugar.

The roots accumulate leached nutrients and recycle them from deep within the subsoil. While chicory prefers sandy, alkaline conditions, it also tolerates poor, compacted soil and helps to break up hard ground. Roots may extend to a depth of more than 60cm in ideal conditions.



Grazing animals find chicory very palatable and the plant is prized by sustainable farmers for improving animal health, as a soil improver and a perennial fodder crop in mixed pastures.

Very Versatile

Foliage may be eaten raw or cooked. Flower petals and young leaves can be added to salad dishes. The leaves are often blanched by excluding sunlight to reduce bitterness. Older leaves may be steamed or used in stir-fries.

Blanched chicory heads or chicons are used as a salad ingredient or cooked vegetable. They form when cut root sections are potted in sand and grown in a dark environment. Buds that develop from the roots emerge as blanched heads of leaves.

Infused fresh leaves and roots are used to make tea. The foliage may also be juiced. Roots can be boiled and steamed as a vegetable or dried and roasted for use as a caffeine-free coffee substitute. The crushed leaves may be used as a poultice.

Growing Your Own

Tough growing conditions increase the coarseness of foliage, reduce the harvest of both roots and leaves and increase their bitterness. Foliage varieties should be grown in conditions similar to that of lettuce with fertile soil and regular watering. Winter crops or those grown under light shade produce the best leaf harvest. Snails and aphids are minor pests.

Plants may be propagated by seed, purchased as potted plants or part of some mesclun seedling mixes or grown from root cuttings.

Getting Choosy About Chicory

Chicory grown for its foliage comes in three main forms:

1) Radichetta, Catalogna or Dandelion Types

These loose-leaf forms, grown as salad vegetables, have frilly foliage or leaves of dandelion appearance.

Puntarella – Best harvested when young, this variety is suited to a wide variety of climates and planting seasons. A selection with distinctive red stems is also available. Kings Seeds.

Barbe De Capucin – A lacy, fine foliated frilly type used for salads. Seed Savers' Network.



2) Radicchio, Chioggia or Hearting Types

These broad leaf forms produce cabbage-like heads, which are often red in colour. They may be eaten raw or cooked.

Radicchio Ambra - A firm headed variety with attractive contrasting white and wine coloured leaves (Yates).

Castelfranco - Attractive red striped and speckled variety forming a loose head (Kings Seeds, Seed Savers' Network).

Red Verona – Deep red leaves form a dense head on this winter maturing variety (Kings Seeds).

Bianca Di Milano - A tender, sweet self-blanching variety that forms large, cylindrical heads (Yates).

Red Treviso – Cold weather accentuates the red colouring and contrasting white veins on this long, cylindrical variety (Diggers Seeds, Kings Seeds).

Palla Rossa – This popular heirloom variety has a round head with dark wine coloured leaves with contrasting white basal veins (Kings Seeds, Seed Savers Network).



3) Witloof, Belgium Endive or Brussels Witloof Types

The tops of these varieties can be used as a salad or vegetable harvest, it is the second crop of blanched chicons for which they are most prized.

Witloof – Prized as a mild tasting, heirloom variety (Kings Seeds, Seed Savers' Network).

Greek Sweet – Frost hardy, heirloom variety (Seed Savers Network).

Witloof Di Bruxelles – A productive, delicately flavoured variety (Yates).

Sugarloaf – Popular, dual purpose variety known for its sweet, self blanching head and repeat harvest of chicons (Kings Seeds).



Chicory Coffee

Maagdeburg and **Brunswick** are the two most popular varieties grown for chicory coffee production due to their large root harvest (Kings Seeds, Seed Savers Network)

To make chicory coffee thoroughly scrub freshly harvested young roots. Slice finely and leave to air dry. Cut sections should then be baked at 150-180 degrees Celsius until brown. Grind as for coffee beans. Use as a coffee substitute or mix with ground coffee to reduce caffeine intake.