Etymology of the word Artichoke



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Aristotle called the artichoke a "cactus," but it wasn't a case of ancient Greek botany gone wrong. Back then, the word for an artichoke--or at least its closest relative, a kind of wild artichoke that's now called a "cardoon"--was *kaktos*. The ancestor of our word "artichoke" comes from the opposite side of the Mediterranean from Greece: Arab-occupied Spain. There, the western Arabic word for an artichoke-y plant, *al-karsufa* (*al* in Arabic just means "the"), turned into the Spanish *alcarchofa*. This worked its way to Northern Italy, where it got turned into *articiocco*, most likely because *ciocco* was the local word for "stump," and *arti-* was a version of our prefix "arch," meaning "high" (and the artichoke plant *does* have a big stumpy mass up high).

Articiocco then worked its way into English, and like the Italians before them, English speakers tended to make up associations for the word. Some called it a "hartichoke," since it looked like a heart; others assumed that the "choke" part had something to do with the hard-to-breathe meaning of "choke," either because you'd choke if you ate the middle of the plant, or because it grew so fast that it would choke out all the other growth around it. All of this was wrong, of course, since it really came from Arabic via Italian. But facts rarely get in the way of a common-sense folk etymology.

So what about the *kaktos*? We can thank the boneheadedness of an otherwise very smart guy, Carl Linnaeus, for that. If you're a little fuzzy on your history, Linnaeus invented our modern system of naming species in the 1700s. It was he who lumped in the thorny, succulent cacti with artichokes, giving the whole

family the name *kaktos*. So *kaktos* became the name for the spiky desert cacti, and artichokes just kept on being artichokes.