

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
Date: September 5, 2004  
Contact: WSU/Skagit County Extension: 428-4270

Have you considered growing garlic but think it may be too difficult? Most experts agree that it is really quite easy to do and very rewarding. If you follow a few simple rules you can harvest large, plump, flavorful bulbs from your own plantings. Garlic may be the oldest cultivated plant known to mankind. It is mentioned in the Chinese Sanskrit writings and early as 3000 B.C. Garlic is also mentioned in the Bible. The Vikings carried garlic on long voyages and the Elizabethans considered garlic to be an aphrodisiac. During World War I garlic compresses were applied to battlefield wounds.

The first step in planting garlic is to choose the variety best suited to your needs. There are several types of garlic. Common garlic or soft-necked garlic, which is the white skinned type sold in the supermarket and the silver skin garlic, often found in braids at farmer's market. This common soft-necked garlic, Allium sativum, has several layers of white parchment surrounding the cloves that can be difficult to remove. It has long lasting bulbs. The silver skinned garlic has the strongest flavor. Hard-neck garlic, Allium ativum ssp. Ophioscorodon, is more like the ancient world form. It has a shorter shelf life and is less productive. It is known by many other common names: serpent garlic, stiff-neck garlic, Rocombole garlic, Bavarian garlic, to name a few. Elephant garlic, Allium ampelopra, is not a true garlic but a leek. It produces enormous bulbs that have a very mild garlic flavor.

In our moderate climate garlic is planted in the fall about 6 weeks before a hard frost, around early October. The roots need time to develop before winter. Choose a sunny spot and prepare a bed of deep, fertile, well-drained soil. Work in well-rotted compost and add an all-purpose 10-10-10 fertilizer. The soil pH should be 6.5 to 7.0. Most Northwest vegetable gardens benefit from a light dressing of lime at least a month before planting. Plant garlic cloves about 6 inches apart. Bury them pointed end up, 1 or 2 inches deep. It may be necessary to mulch the bed if there is repeated freezing and thawing during the winter, causing the ground to heave. Shoots will appear in late fall or early spring. If a flower stalk appears snip it off. As the tops begin to grow in earnest the two most important things to remember are that garlic does not compete well with weeds and the bed should not dry out. Weeding and watering are vital. Garlic requires about an inch of water a week during the growing period. Stop watering in late July to allow the foliage to die down.

Before all the tops have turned brown, while there are still a few green leaves left, pull the plants up, being careful not to damage the bulbs. Knock off as much soil as possible and store in a warm, dark, dry area. Temperatures should not exceed 80 degrees. After bulbs have cured for 2 to 4 weeks the tops and roots can be trimmed. Cured garlic can be stored for up to 10 months. Remember to save some cloves to plant for next year's crop. Sources for garlic starts can be difficult to find but you are far better off choosing bulbs that have been grown locally. You can use cloves from garlic sold in the grocery store but be sure the bulbs are free of any blemishes or disease.

Garlic can have some problems primarily because of poor growing conditions; too little water, not enough nutrients, heavy soil or poorly drained wet soil. If you have never had good luck growing garlic you might try again on a small scale by planting a few cloves in a half barrel filled with light, fluffy potting soil. This would be easy to tend and to monitor the moisture level.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.