

Time to Plant Garlic!

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The ‘Stinking Rose’ is easy to grow, easy to harvest and fun to share.

October is the perfect time to plant bulbs – tulips, crocuses, daffodils and other flowers whose petals will spring into next year’s garden season. While you’re planting those bulbs be sure to make space in the garden for an edible bulb, the ‘stinking rose’ – a name for garlic that reaches back to the Roman and Greek empires. Garlic originally grew in central Asia, but the word ‘garlic’ comes from an old English word for ‘spear leek.’ Leeks, shallots, and onions are related to garlic; all are members of the *Allium* family – known for its pungent presence. Various sulfur compounds give these *Alliums* their distinctive, if not notorious, smell. The botanical name for garlic is *Allium sativum*, but you can just call it tasty and easy to grow.

Choose an area in your garden that gets good sun exposure even when the sun is low in the winter sky. Like almost everything (except weeds), growing garlic requires well-drained soil. A raised bed is a great place for garlic, since it is higher than the often saturated ground. Garlic thrives in rich, composted soil with a pH level between 6 – 7. Split a head of garlic into individual cloves, use the smaller ones for cooking and plant the larger ones to produce a crop of heads with larger cloves.

Garlic withstands our relatively mild winter temperatures and some varieties are so cold-hardy they thrive in sub-zero temperatures. ‘Premium Northern White’ and the aptly-named ‘Siberian’ are two varieties of hardneck garlic that withstand much colder winters than we get in northwest Washington.

HARDNECK OR SOFTNECK?

Hardneck garlic is named after its stiff central stem. They often have larger cloves, growing in a single circle around the woody stem. In midsummer these stems produce flower stalks curling into wild, fantastical shapes. These curvaceous stalks do take energy away from bulb production, but they add a playful touch to the otherwise goal-oriented vegetable garden. These are called ‘garlic scapes’ – green, mild-tasting, and easy to chop into seasoning. Some farmers grow them as a commercial crop – these fields must look like Dr. Seuss landscapes!

Some hardneck garlics don’t store as long as softneck varieties, but the larger cloves are easier to prepare for cooking. I have a ‘bunch’ of hardneck garlic hanging in the kitchen where I can easily pull off cloves for seasoning. However, if you want to twist your garlic crop into tidy braids, plant a softneck variety. They produce several layers of smaller cloves around a soft central stem that can be easily bent and twisted.

If you want really big cloves, plant 'Elephant Garlic. It's more closely related to leeks than other garlics. The huge cloves are easy to peel, but the flavor is sweeter and much less intense than regular garlic.

PLANT IT NOW!

Garlic needs to develop roots before the winter rains settle in, so plant them as soon as possible. I've planted garlic as late as Thanksgiving, paying for my tardiness with greatly reduced yields. Don't make the same mistake – plant now! Plant each clove 2 inches deep and about 5 inches apart. Try more than one variety, label the rows, and do your own research on which kinds grow and taste best. Luckily, garlic's pungency repels most pests, so row covers and chemicals are unnecessary. In fact, organic gardeners use homemade garlic sprays to control aphids and whiteflies. The stinking rose is quite versatile!

It's exciting to see garlic pushing up their fat green shoots in the gray of winter. The shoots often appear randomly, so don't despair if your garlic patch looks patchy for a while. When spring growth begins, water enough to keep the soil slightly moist and apply a high-nitrogen fertilizer every two weeks for a two months.

HARVEST IN MAY OR JULY?

If you just can't wait for summer, you can dig up a few of your immature garlic plants in May. This produces fresh green garlic that has not yet divided into bulbs – a great spring wake-up for soups, omelets and roast vegetables. Leave the rest of the plants for harvest in late July, watering them as needed until the leaves begin to yellow. Then withhold water, let the ground dry, and dig up your garlic crop.

Tie the plants in bundles and store in a cool, shaded, well-ventilated place while the bulbs dry and 'cure.' After about two weeks, brush off any dried soil and torn husks, leaving at least one layer of husk to protect the bulbs. Now braid the softneck varieties, and hang them in a cool



Polish Softneck garlic lives up to its name: the soft center stem can easily be bunched or braided. Softneck garlic can be stored longer than most hardneck varieties. Photo courtesy of Territorial Seed Company.



Inchelium Red is a hardneck garlic, with a stiff central stem that's impossible to braid. But tied in bundles, hung near the spice rack, hardneck varieties bring panache and convenience to your kitchen. Photo courtesy of Territorial Seed Company.

location away from direct sunlight. Hardneck varieties can also be hung in bundles, or you can cut off the tops and store the cloves in a well-ventilated container, like a mesh bag.

Garlic is a wonderful gift from the garden – people are usually amazed that you actually grew the bulb or braid you give them! And roasted garlic tastes like summer, even when winter rain drenches the garden. So don't wait – pick up some planting garlic at your favorite garden store or the Skagit Valley Food Coop and get digging!

ENJOY GARLIC YEAR ROUND!

Even if you don't have a garden, you can enjoy garlic year-round. Plant a few cloves in a small pot filled with light potting mix. Set the pot on a sunny window-sill. Snip the garlicky-tasting greens as they grow, adding them to salads, soups, pizza, etc.

RESOURCES

Garlic For Beginners, article and slide show, Organic Gardening magazine
www.organicgardening.com/feature/0,7518,s1-5-16-124,00.html

Territorial Seed Company catalogue, p. 18-22. Order at
www.territorialseed.com/catalog_request or 1-800-626-0866

En Espanol: La Construcción de Camas Elevadas (Building Raised Beds)
<http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/html/ec/ec1537-s-e/>

Guía de Plantar para los Legumbres y Verduras en Oregon (Vegetable Planting Guide for Oregon) <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/pdf/em/em8769-s-e.pdf>