



These garlic varieties were grown in Granger by Tiva Farms and are sold at Johnson Fruit in Yakima.
CAROL BARANY PHOTO

At Every Stage, Garlic Really Is Delicious

And Garlic has been a part of culinary culture for some 5,000 years.

by Carol Barany for Yakima Valley Master Gardeners

Garlic... I can't remember ever *not* loving it. In fact, the phrase "too garlicky" has never been part of my vocabulary.

I'm not the only one who savors garlic's bright flavor. An essential seasoning in cuisines worldwide,

there is evidence that Egyptian and Indian cultures grew garlic for use in cooking 5,000 years ago.

Maybe that's because at every stage of growth, garlic is delicious. In the spring, harvest the leaves and use them as you would the tops of green onions. Garlic scapes emerge next. The thin, curly, green stems resemble wild onions. Some growers remove the scapes at this time, allowing more of the plant's resources to stay within the bulb. If you do, don't toss the trimmings on the compost pile. Young garlic scapes are tender and tasty and can be used like chives or shallots. And there's more. If left to mature, the scapes soon produce dramatic flower buds to use in bouquets.

Garlic varieties are divided into two types. Hardnecks typically have large cloves that encircle a hard central stem, or 'neck'. While very cold tolerant, they don't store as well as the softnecks. Softneck cloves are smaller and form in a swirl of overlapping layers with no defined neck. It's the type usually sold in supermarkets because it keeps so well.

So far, the genetic fingerprints of 211 different varieties of garlic have been identified. Each can be sorted into one of ten distinct groups, eight of which are hardneck. The varieties within each of these groups may look and taste slightly different, but they are genetically the same. Higher levels of sulfenic acid give some garlic varieties a chili-like burn that can make your eyes water. Others are mild and mellow.

Farm stands are now stocked with an array of garlic grown in the Yakima Valley. These heirloom varieties are as different from supermarket garlic as one of your homegrown Brandywine tomatoes is from a Safeway Roma. Take a taste and see for yourself.

The difference may just be great enough to make you decide to grow some garlic of your own. While the rest of the garden is winding down, garlic is planted in late-September or October. With six weeks to grow before the soil freezes, roots have time to establish before going dormant in winter.

SOIL PREPARATION

Give it a place in full sun that will be undisturbed during the growing season. Loosen the soil with a digging fork, spread a 2- to 3-inch-deep layer of organic matter over the area, and dig it in. Gently break apart the garlic bulb and plant the largest, plumpest cloves with their papery coverings still intact, pointy side up. Space cloves 4" apart, and cover with 2" of soil and water well. To avoid disease problems, don't plant garlic in the same spot two years in a row.

GROWING

Cover the bed with 4" of straw mulch to protect any green growth that emerges, though you may not see any shoots until early spring when the soil warms. That's the time to remove the mulch.

HARVEST

Harvest comes in late spring or early summer, when the bottom two sets of leaves are brown and dry (each green leaf represents a wrapper layer surrounding the head). During harvest and cleaning, try to end up with two or three tight, papery layers enclosing each bulb. To harvest, drive a garden fork carefully beneath the plants, and gently pry them out, keeping the tops attached. Cloves should feel full and firm, covered in a sturdy, papery skin. Overripe garlic cloves will separate and may soften or shrivel. Shake off any excess soil and move the plants to an airy location protected from sun and rain. You can eat the garlic now, but it reaches its peak of flavor after curing. Bulbs intended for storage must be cured.

CURING

Hang the bare bulbs with their foliage in bundles or spread them out on a table or rack in a dry place out of the sun for 3-4 weeks.

CLEANING

After curing, cut the stalks to 12 inches, and trim the roots close to the bulb. Rub off the outer layer of skin around the bulb, and use a nailbrush or toothbrush to gently remove any soil clinging to the base. Try not to remove more wrapper layers than you have to.

STORING

Store the clean bulbs in a well-ventilated, dark spot in mesh onion bags or wicker baskets. You can select some of the larger heads and save them for fall planting and next year's crop. You'll get a big return on your investment, since every clove becomes a bulb.

For more gardening information, links, and photographs, visit the Yakima Master Gardener Column Website: <https://tinyurl.com/mg-columns>.

