

# How to Grow and Store Garlic

by Claudia Steen

October is a great time to start thinking about ordering and planting your garlic, which will be harvested next summer. Did you ever wonder how "garlic" got its name? The word comes from the Old English *garleac*, which means "spear leek". Garlic is a root crop and member of the onion family, as are shallots, chives, and leeks. Native to Central Asia, garlic is a centuries-old staple in the Mediterranean region as well as a seasoning in Asia, Africa and Europe. It is an edible bulb composed of several smaller cloves. There are over 300 varieties of garlic grown worldwide. The most common varieties grown in the Inland Northwest are hardneck and softneck.

**Hardneck** varieties (*Allium sativum* var *ophioscorodon*) produce a flower stock called a 'scape'. The flowers are usually aborted and 'bulbils' form in their place. These are small aerial cloves that have the same genetic make-up as the mother plant. They can be used for propagation, but the bulbs formed from bulbils are usually small the first year after planting and it normally takes 2 to 3 years before there is a good-sized bulb. This is, however, an economical way to increase seed stock. If you are not going to produce seed, cutting off the flower stalk forces the plant to put all its energy into making a larger bulb. These cut-off "scapes" are mild in flavor and frequently used in cooking.

Hardneck varieties typically have four to twelve cloves surrounding the flower stalk. The flower stalk is hard and does not braid easily. There are many hardneck varieties including German Red, cold hardy Russian Red, Spanish Roja Rocambole, Porcelain and Purple Stripe. German Red grows very well in the Inland Northwest, has easy-to-peel cloves and an excellent, strong flavor. Rocambole also grows well in this area but has a very thin skin covering, causing the cloves to become exposed if handled excessively. The cloves are irregular in size but have a good flavor. Porcelain garlic has 4-8 large cloves covered in a thick white skin, a strong taste, and stores well. Purple Stripe garlic has thick white skins streaked with purple. There are several types in this variety, with mild to strong flavor.

**Softneck** garlic, sometimes known as "artichoke" garlic, has bulbs with white or off-white skin. The outer cloves are quite large, and the inner cloves are small. The skin continues to grow upward, forming a soft stem that is easy to braid. This garlic keeps well and has a medium to strong flavor. The main varieties are Italian, Silverskin, Inchelium Red, New York White, Polish White, Silver White.

**Elephant garlic** (*Allium scorodoprasum*) is not a true garlic but a close relative to the leek. It may produce a bulb up to six times larger than regular garlic, with a very mild flavor. Elephant garlic cloves usually form a round onion-type bulb the first year. The round bulb is then replanted and forms a cluster the following year.

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Deep, fertile, well-drained soil in a sunny location is ideal. Adding well-rotted compost is beneficial to the garlic bed. Rotating garlic crops from year to year helps prevent soil-borne disease. Garlic and onions should not be planted in the same place for more than two years in a row. In our area, the best time to plant garlic is early to mid-October. Garlic grows best in cold weather and stops growing in temperatures above 90C. This gives the bulbs a chance to set roots without sending up shoots and roots stabilize the cloves in the soil.

Choose large, blemish-free cloves and plant them root end down, pointed end up. They should be planted 3" deep and spaced 4-6" apart. Cover the garlic bed with a layer of mulch at least six inches



deep. In the spring, pull the mulch aside. Maintain a constant level of moisture in the soil for optimum clove development. Waterlogged soil or drought conditions can produce poor heads. If spring temperatures are unusually hot, place mulch around the plants to keep the ground cool.

Garlic is ready to harvest when one-third of the foliage has died back. Lift the plants out of the soil with a garden fork, inserting the fork about 4 inches away from the plant to loosen the soil around the bulb. Lift the bulb out by gently pulling on the stalk. Shake off all loose soil. Garlic must be “cured” before utilizing it in the kitchen. Place whole garlic plants on a screen in a covered area to dry. Garlic left out in the sun will sunburn and the outer skins of the heads can split from drying too fast. When the tops are dry, cut the stems down to 1 inch. Let the bulbs continue to dry until you can rub the remaining soil off easily. Cut off the roots. Using a soft-bristled toothbrush, remove the soil from the root area. You may have to remove one layer of skin to get a clean head.

Store cooking garlic in a cool, dry, well-ventilated area in a mesh bag. Hardneck varieties keep up to 6 months, softneck for up to 9 months. The ideal storage temperature is 45-50°F. Discard any damaged bulbs or cloves immediately. If you keep some garlic for seed, choose the largest heads with the largest cloves. Do not split the cloves apart until you are ready to plant them. Store seed bulbs in a cool, dry place.

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