

GROWING GARLIC

Love it or hate it, garlic holds a proud place in history, kitchens and gardens around the world. It's easy to grow, good for you and wards off everything from colds and aphids to vampires and bad dates.

Few plants have divided societies - and rooms - as much as this member of the onion family. *Allium sativum* has been around for a long time. It was mentioned in the Bible, in Sanskrit writings from 3000 BC and was in the tomb of Tutankhamen. Nero loved it, Roman priestesses shunned it, Pliny the Elder prescribed it for infections, insomnia, epilepsy and haemorrhoids.

It's rich in vitamins A, B1 and C and contains sulphur, calcium, magnesium, iron, potassium and zinc. It is said to guard against cholesterol, high blood pressure, heart disease, infections and colds.

There are two main varieties. Softneck varieties are the most common. They don't have a flowerhead and tend to have a longer shelf life. Hardneck varieties have flowerheads like onions, produce fewer, bigger cloves and prefer cooler climates such as ours.

Garlic is also said to repel aphids and can be used as a companion plant for roses, fruit trees and members of the tomato family.

Site and soil

Garlic likes full sun, good drainage and some well incorporated compost or aged manure.

Planting

In cooler areas, garlic can be planted anytime between late autumn and early spring for best results. Source garlic from an organic provider and steer clear of imported bulbs as they (by necessity) have been fumigated with methyl bromide as they reach Australia.

Separate a bulb into individual cloves. - it's best to source the bulb from an organic provider. Plant each clove pointy end upwards a few centimetres below the soil surface, spaced 10-20 cm apart.

Mulch well as garlic doesn't like competition from weeds. Regular watering is important and the ground should not be allowed to dry out completely during bulb formation.

Harvesting

Garlic is slow to mature, generally taking around 8 months to produce a bulb. Harvest when the leaves begin to turn brown or yellow - don't wait until the foliage has completely died back.

Stop watering the plants for at least a week before you intend to harvest. Lift the bulbs carefully from the soil with a fork. If it's good weather, leave them to dry in the sun for a few days.

Problems

Garlic has few problems with pests or diseases. Thrips can be a problem as can downy mildew and the fungal disease white rot in cool wet weather.

Poor growth may be the result of planting time, watering schedule, soil acidity or variety.



Choosing and using

Choose bulbs that are plump and hard with no spots or bruises. Fresh garlic has a mild flavour and should be moist and crunchy. Flavour becomes stronger as the garlic dries.

Don't store garlic in the fridge. It will keep for up to 9 months in a cool, airy place - try hanging in bunches or spreading on racks. Bulbs are best stored whole rather than separated into cloves.

It is an essential ingredient in Asian, Mediterranean, Eastern European and Arabian cuisines and can be savoured in many ways, including roasting, braising, frying, and raw.

To easily remove skins, try dropping a clove into boiling water for a couple of seconds, then running cold water over them - the skins should slip off. Garlic presses can be useful, but remember that the flavour will be stronger than if a clove is chopped or crushed.

References and further reading

- Organic Vegetable Growing (Annette McFarlane)
- From A la Carte to Zucchini (Anthony Barker)
- Garlic growing in Australia www.garlic.com.au

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