

Garlic!

By Sarah Hashimoto

If you love garlic but haven't grown it before, don't wait! It's not too late to get a great crop growing for next year. Garlic is a staple in our kitchen, and now that I have discovered how truly easy it is to grow, harvest, and store, I can't imagine my garden without it. It requires very little from you as a gardener, and it gives great results in return. Now, if I could just get it to teach those habits to the cucumbers, I would really be set!

Varieties

There are two types of garlic, hardneck and softneck. Hardneck garlic sends up a hard flower stem around which the cloves grow. This kind of garlic is sometimes called "topsetting garlic," since the stem produces small bulblets at the tip (these bulblets should be removed so that the plant can focus its energy below). Most garlic connoisseurs will tell you that at least as far as taste is concerned, hardneck varieties are superior to softneck varieties, for they are said to have more complex, interesting flavors. My husband, who claims to be a garlic connoisseur, will attest to this fact; all I can tell you is that the hardneck garlic that we grow is indeed delicious. Hardnecks also have bigger cloves that are easier to peel. Hardnecks must be planted in the fall. The one drawback to hardneck garlic is that it doesn't keep for very long. Usually, you can count on keeping the bulbs for six months, from mid-summer to January.

Hardneck garlic can be sub-divided into several groups: Rocambole, Porcelain, Creole, Asiatic, and Purple-Stripe. Rocambole, probably the most popular of these sub-groups, grows 6-13 cloves/bulb, is easy to peel, and has a full-bodied flavor. I am fond of the Porcelain group, which has the largest cloves out of any of the hardnecks. Porcelains aren't super hot, but they are very tasty. They also store quite well.

Softneck garlic is distinguished from hardneck garlic because, as you might suspect, the stems are soft and pliable. This means that you can braid the stems for storage (or combine the garlic with dried peppers to make a fabulous gift!). Softneck garlic has superior storage qualities, and thus it is the type that you will most often find in the supermarket. Under the right conditions, softnecks will keep for up to ten months. The flavor of softnecks is usually very mild or very hot, with little in between. Softnecks are easier to grow than hardnecks, though, since they are more adaptable to different climates and soils. In places where the winters are extremely harsh, gardeners can plant softneck varieties in the spring and still get a decent, although not spectacular, harvest.

Softnecks can be divided into a couple of groups, the Artichoke group and the Silverskin group. Artichokes are the most common. They are easy to grow, have approximately 12-20 cloves/head, and keep very well. They grow well in most climates. Silverskins are the kind of garlic you find most often in the supermarket, because they have exceptional storage abilities. They are very productive and perfect for braiding. I should mention, however, that they prefer a slightly warmer winter than the artichokes, which makes them a bit trickier to grow.

Soil preparation

You've probably already guessed what kind of soil garlic likes best. Rich, fertile soil, lots of organic matter, loose, not clayey. If that's the kind of soil that you have, good for you! You'll have to let me know how it goes, because I grow my garlic in crummy soil, solid clay (I suspect that it is fill dirt). I have mixed in compost and leaves to lighten things up a bit, but the clay is so hard that it tends to form clumps that are impervious to lightening. I'm sure that lighter soils are optimal, but if you fertilize well during the growing season, I think you can make due with whatever you have available. The one thing that I have learned about garlic is that it is pretty forgiving.

Planting

While it is possible to plant softneck garlic in the spring, for best results, you have to plant in the fall. In Michigan, we plant 4-6 weeks before the ground freezes, usually anywhere from October through November. This planting schedule allows the garlic to start developing a good root system so that it doesn't get heaved out of the soil when the ground freezes. Usually, the very cold weather hits before it sprouts too many leaves. I should note, however, that even if your garlic sprouts quite a bit, it is not something to worry about. I have seen garlic planted in warmer micro-climates, usually right up against houses, and it does just fine.

When planting your garlic, you'll want to choose the largest cloves. Small cloves usually grow small bulbs, and big cloves grow big bulbs. Push the cloves into the soil root-side down (not the pointy end down!) and about 1-2 inches below the surface. Space the cloves 4-6 inches apart. Finally, cover with soil and mulch lightly with hay, grass clippings, or shredded leaves. Mulching is an important step, since this prevents the cloves from heaving out in the winter. Furthermore, mulching also suppresses weeds and helps to conserve moisture.

Grow!

When spring comes, your garlic will start sending shoots up through the mulch. At this point, you should fertilize the plants by sidedressing with compost. For the absolute best results, you can also use a foliar fertilizer of liquid kelp, seaweed, or fish emulsion.

When the garlic greens are still young and tender, pick a few and taste them. Yum! Garlic greens are absolutely delicious. The flavor, as you might suspect, is garlicky, but it also has more than a hint of onion. Some people eat the greens raw, but I prefer to cook them, since the flavor mellows with cooking. We generally use the greens in stir-fry, but I have also tasted garlic pesto, which was quite nice.

Hardneck varieties will send up a tall flowering stalk with bulblets at the tip in June. Snip the bulblets off, since you want the plant's energy to go into making a large bulb, not into making seeds. Don't throw these bulblets away! They are a tasty addition to stir-frys, and a hint of what's to come.

Problems

What problems? Garlic is rarely bothered by pests. This is because, as you may already know, garlic itself is very effective at deterring a wide range of pests. Garlic sprays are an indispensable part of the organic gardener's arsenal. If you have the room, though, you should consider rotating crops and not planting garlic where garlic, onions, leeks, or any other member of the allium family has been planted in the past three years. While garlic is generally free from problems, pests or diseases alike, crop rotation will ensure that the odd disease doesn't visit your plants at all.