



Urban Harvest

Growing Garlic is Especially Easy

By Bob Randall, Ph.D.

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There are few if any vegetables easier than garlic to grow. Many years ago I taught my then 6-year old son to plant garlic and for several years until he got bored, he kept the family in this kitchen mainstay.

Garlic contains alliin which when crushed becomes the potent antibiotic allicin. This is reported to fight viruses, fungi, parasites, and as well lower cholesterol, inhibit blood clots, and help prevent heart attack. When cooked, allicin breaks down, but probably has similar properties.

The next month or so is an excellent time to plant garlic. You need a raised bed of good soil enriched with a balanced organic fertilizer such as Microlife. They will do especially well if the soil has been regularly mulched with a biologically active mulch like native mulch or a quality leaf mold compost. But almost any fertile well-drained soil will probably produce something useful.

Garlic is not grown from seed. Rather it is grown from the individual cloves that make up a garlic bulb. Garlic originated in Central Asia where it withstood much more cold than we have. So there are varieties commonly planted in late fall in places like New England. But those varieties will not fare well here. Rather, you need to get garlic cloves from varieties that will thrive in our mild climate.

There are at least 600 varieties of garlic, and only two varieties -- California early and California late "artichoke" garlics -- are commonly found in our markets. These keep



These 'Lorz Italian' garlic cloves are ready for transplant while young garlic plants grow on the edge of fall bean bed.

well, but are less flavored than many garlics and have a large number of small cloves that are more difficult to use in cooking.

If you purchase organic ones (that haven't been preserved), these will do well most years if planted in our area. However there are many better varieties that will do well here and still more that will do well in colder places.

Garlic is generally classified into "hard neck" and "soft neck" varieties. Hard necks have a stiff stem that remains until cut even after harvest. They are generally more pungent and fatter cloves, so for most culinary purposes would be better, but they are picky about where they will grow and they don't grow here well. This is partly because they don't survive even in a refrigerator to fall. So you can harvest a crop in cooler winters, but you won't have any to plant next fall.

The "soft necks" are much better for us. Of these there are two main types -- "Silverskins" and "Artichokes." There are many varieties of both and I have grown a fair number. Most of them do well in winters that are cool and not too wet, but are often disappointing in the warmer wetter winters we seem to have more often these days. Artichokes have the general characteristics of the bulbs in the stores, but often have wider cloves and more burgundy coloring

You can experiment with any of the varieties recommended for the south by "Mr. Texas Garlic" Bob Anderson and sold by Gourmet Garlic Gardens in Bang, Texas. I particularly like the artichoke garlic "Lorz Italian." See www.gourmetgarlicgardens.com/growsouth.htm.

Planting garlic is easy. Break the bulb into cloves. Discard or eat small ones and plant large ones. Put them 4-6 inches apart so that the root end of the bulb is down and the opposite tip of the clove is just below the soil's surface. Keep weeded and if it is dry before May, watered. Mulch once they are up. Since garlic will be in the ground from November to May or June, it may be useful to plant it where it will not interfere with new plants seeded in spring. I therefore usually plant garlic on the edge of beds so that I can plant melons in the center in April. By the time melons crawl to the edges, the garlic is harvested.

When the leaves die back in May or June, wash the bulbs, and then dry under a roof. Spread out the garlic on fencing or screening off the floor until the leaves are dead. Cut off the dead leaves 1 inch from the bulb, and store them in a paper bag in refrigerator. Separate the largest bulbs for seed for next year.

Urban Harvest produces this column. Learn about gardening classes, community and school gardens, farmers' markets, organic landscaping and more at www.urbanharvest.org.