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Plant Garlic Now for Summer Harvest

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While some may consider purchasing garlic cloves this time of year to ward off vampires, a better reason would be to plant the cloves for a pungent harvest next summer. It may seem a little late for planting now but garlic is an exception. Ideally, garlic cloves would be planted about a month before a hard frost is expected. With this fall's warmer than normal temperatures, a late garlic planting is better. If planted too early, the cloves will start sending up green shoots instead of putting efforts into root growth. This may result in smaller bulbs. At least 2 months of temperatures 40 F or below are needed to induce good bulb formation.

Garlic (*Allium sativum*) is not a difficult crop to grow. It does not have many pest problems and is tolerant of a range of soil types and soil pH levels. Do select a site in full sun and with a well-drained soil. The soil should be moderately fertile and it is important to keep the planting beds weed-free, as garlic does not compete well with more vigorous plants.

Each garlic bulb contains a number of individual cloves (technically called bulbils) around a central stem. When planting garlic, the cloves are separated and planted singly to a depth of 2 to 3 inches with about a 6-inch spacing between the cloves. Cloves of extra-large varieties, like elephant garlic, should be planted to a 4-inch depth. This prevents the top of the maturing bulbs from turning green from exposure to sunlight, much like potatoes. After planting but before the ground freezes, place a 4 to 6-inch layer of mulch, such as leaves or straw, over your garlic bed so the soil will take longer to freeze which will give the roots more time to grow.

Pull back the mulch slowly as temperatures start to climb next spring. You would notice green shoots appearing and when they reach 6 inches or so, give them some high nitrogen fertilizer, like bloodmeal, to encourage vigorous growth. Use as directed by the package or a soil test. Usually towards the end of July through August, the tops start to yellow and dry. When most of them have done so, it is time to dig up your bulbs. Gently shake off soil and set them on screens in a dry, shady area for several weeks. Bring in or cover if rain is predicted. Then, they can get the rest of the soil brushed off and either braided or stored in mesh bags. Ideal storage conditions are around 50 F with humidity levels between 45 and 55 percent.

The hardest part about growing garlic is deciding which variety to plant. There are two main subspecies of garlic, hardnecks and softnecks and at least 5 distinct types although modern DNA analysis is finding more genetically different plants. Softneck varieties are the ones usually found in grocery stores as they can be planted mechanically. They will keep for up to 10 months if conditions are right. They mature faster and are usually more productive than hardnecks. The stems of the softnecks are more pliable and can be braided. Two common types of softnecks are artichoke and silverskins.

Hardnecks require a bit more care. The cloves need to be hand planted and the curly flower stalks, known as scapes, should be removed for larger, better quality bulbs. If the scapes are harvested when young and tender, they make a savory addition to stirfries. Hardneck varieties also are more suitable in areas of cold winters and damp, cool springs like we usually experience in the Northeast. They are often more colorful and include purple striped types, rocambole and porcelain garlic. Some are very pungent, others mild, and some favored for roasting.

Garlic is believed to have originated in Central Asia and the Chinese domesticated the plant about 7000 years ago. Presently, China is responsible for about 80 percent of the world's garlic production. People living in northern Asian countries consume more garlic than those living in other parts of the world perhaps because of garlic's long held reputation as a cure for many ills.

Sulfur compounds found in garlic called allins may protect against cancer and cardiovascular diseases. In fact, epidemiological evidence points to lower cancer incidence in locations with high garlic consumption. Raw garlic contains more of these sulfur compounds than cooked garlic. Garlic also contains a fair amount of potassium and vitamin C.

While its primary use in our area is as a vibrant culinary flavoring, its potential health benefits just adds another reason to plant a few bulbs in your garden. Some claim garlic to be a good companion plant for roses, cabbages, eggplants and tomatoes as it reputedly repels some insects. Garlic does not take up a lot of room and can be interplanted with other vegetables and herbs. Parsley pairs up with it nicely and one folk cure for garlic breath is to chew on a sprig of parsley immediately after eating garlic.

Seek out garlic bulbs at local garden centers and agricultural supply stores and use this extended patch of temperate weather to get your garlic planted in the ground. If you have questions about growing garlic or have questions on other home or garden topics, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free in CT, at (877) 486-6271, visit us at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or call your local Cooperative Extension Center.