

The Herbalist

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Garlic (*Allium sativum*; Family Liliaceae)

The origin of garlic is unknown although it has a long history. It is thought that it might have been indigenous to the southwest of Siberia where it spread to southern Europe. It has been known and used in China for centuries and is referenced in the Chinese Calendar of Hsai which dates to 2000 years before Christ. It is also part of Hebrew Talmudic law which requires its use in certain dishes.

The name, garlic, is of Anglo Saxon origin and is derived from "gar" (a spear) which is a reference to its leaves and "lac" (a plant). Garlic is part of the *Allium* genus which contains around 400 varieties including onions and leeks. There are two known varieties of *Allium sativum*: softnecks and hardnecks.

Softneck garlic, *A. sativum* var. *sativum* is the most commonly found; it is carried by most supermarkets. Softneck garlic is easier to grow, keeps longer than hardneck garlic, and is recognized by its white papery skin and a large number of cloves in layers around a central core. It also has a flexible stalk which allows it to be braided.

Hardneck garlic, *A. sativum* var. *ophioscorodon*, has a coiling scape. They have fewer, larger cloves and less of an outer skin which reduces their shelf life.

Garlic grows in zones 5-10 and prefers full sun although it will grow in partial shade. Soil should be humusy, deep and well drained with a pH suitable for vegetables. Buy bulbs from a grower; supermarket bulbs produce very poor results. Gently separate the individual cloves from the bulb immediately before planting. Plant, root down, in October for harvesting the following summer. Cloves should be planted 2 inches deep and 6 inches apart. Keep the area well weeded and avoid wet soil to prevent bulb diseases. Mulch with 3-4 inches of shredded leaves or straw after the ground freezes. This will prevent them from heaving out of the ground during winter thaws. In spring side dress the garlic with compost (never fresh manure).

Each clove will grow to a height of 2 feet with foliage that resembles that of an onion. Garlic flowers in early summer with small white to pink blooms atop a tall, central stalk. For larger bulbs prune away the flower stalks in early summer. Dig bulbs after the tops have died down but before the bulb skins begin to decay. Lace in a single layer in a shady spot to dry; then cut away the tops leaving 2" of stem or braid together the tops of freshly dug plants. Hang braids or loose bulbs in nets from the ceiling in a cool, humid, dark place.