



by Carol Seminara, HCMG

## Great Garlic

Garlic, a.k.a. the stinking rose, has long enjoyed its deserved reputation as an indispensable culinary and medicinal marvel. It has been around so long, that its actual origin is unknown, although botanists believe that garlic likely originated in western China several thousand years ago. Garlic is known to have been a favorite food of the ancient Egyptians, who believed that it was divine. Clay models of garlic were found in Egyptian tombs and six dried garlic bulbs were entombed with Tutankhamen. Garlic bulbs have been worn as a talisman to dispel evil spirits, witches and, or course, vampires.

A pungent member of the allium family, garlic is rich in vitamins A and C, potassium, phosphorous, selenium and several amino acids, and is credited with many healing properties. It is a natural antifungal and antibacterial due to its allicin content, which is a complex sulfur compound that occurs when the garlic cloves are crushed. Garlic juice contains a natural antibiotic, which when applied topically, can clear up minor skin infections such as athletes foot and, according to some legends, acne. Taken by mouth, garlic can help prevent colds, flu or sore throats. Current research shows garlic helps lower blood cholesterol by preventing plaque build up in the arteries, can help lower blood pressure, and it may aid in the body's defense against the formation of cancer cells.

There are three kinds of garlic: soft-neck or common garlic (*Allium sativum*); hardneck garlic (*Allium sativum* ophioscorodon) and so-called elephant garlic (*Allium ampeloprasum*), which despite its enormous cloves has virtually no garlic flavor.

Soft-neck garlic is the variety we are most familiar with growing in this area, as the hardneck variety needs a cool winter and spring for successful cultivation and generally will not succeed in hot areas. Garlic can be grown from seeds and from individual cloves, although it is generally cultivated vegetatively from cloves. Each clove produces one plant with a single bulb. Since each bulb may contain up to 20 cloves, it is easy to sustain a ready crop of garlic.

Garlic should be planted in well-drained soil in a sunny location. Use only large, firm, well-formed cloves and plant each clove upright at least one inch and no more than two inches under the soil and about 4-6 inches apart. Rows should be about 18 inches apart. Avoid overwatering — garlic is susceptible to root rot. The pointed green shoots of the growing bulb gave garlic its name, which is of Anglo-Saxon origin: from gaar (spear) and lac (plant).

In the garden, garlic makes a wonderful companion plant for some, but not other crops. When planted with lettuces, garlic helps deter aphids, and a clove of garlic is credited with being a rose's best friend. Garlic reportedly improves the flavor of beets and cabbage, but does not make a good neighbor when planted near peas, beans or potatoes.

Garlic is ready to harvest after the leaves have died off and are dry. The state of the leaves is the prime indicator when the bulbs are ready for harvesting and not the calendar. Harvest the bulbs by digging them up. Shake off excess soil and allow the outer skins of the bulbs to dry either by laying them on a screen or hanging in a well-ventilated area away from direct sunlight. When dry, you can trim off the roots and rub off the dirty and/or discolored outer dried skin or parchment. Stored garlic should be kept in a cool, dry, well-ventilated place.

There are several books devoted specifically to garlic, and the British website [Garlicworld Gardening](#) has several links to other garlic cultivation sites.