



## Grow your own Garlic

by Michelle Le Strange, Master Gardener Program

One of the easiest plants to grow in the garden is garlic. Closely related to onions, leeks, shallots and chives, garlic is another member of the Amaryllis family. It is a perennial plant with an underground bulb composed of pungent bulblets, commonly called cloves. The pungent flavor of garlic is caused by a chemical reaction that occurs when the garlic cells are broken. This flavor is most intense shortly after cutting or chopping.

Approximately 90 percent of the garlic commercially grown in the United States is grown in California and the two major varieties are called: California Early and California Late.

- California Early has white skins and is planted in November for harvest in June.
- California Late has light purple skins and is planted in December for harvest in July and August.

Giant or Elephant Garlic is not true garlic, and is more closely related to leek. It has a larger bulb (almost the size of a fist) with a milder flavor distinct from garlic. However growing requirements are similar.

Garlic is hardy to winter cold. The best crops grow in loose, reasonably fertile, well drained soil. Clear a small area in the garden, spade or till in a bag of compost, and rake the soil to a fine texture. You can plant in a row or tuck a few cloves here and there with flowers or other perennials.

The first time you plant garlic you should buy planting cloves from your local nursery or garden center. Their heads (bulbs) are typically larger than those in the grocery store and more reliable to grow. Break the heads apart and remove the very smallest cloves and any that are discolored, moldy, or missing their protective papery jackets. Use large cloves to grow larger plants and bulbs at harvest.

Push the cloves (pointed end up) into the soil about 2-inches deep. Space the cloves about 6-inches apart, and if you plant in rows they should be 8-12 inches apart. One clove will yield a whole bulb. So how much you plant depends upon how much you love to eat garlic.

It might take a while but eventually thin green shoots resembling



Young garlic plants in spring

thick grass blades will emerge. Let the plants grow all winter, spring and into summer. Some attention to weeding and an occasional fertilizer feeding is all that is required. A clump of shoots will grow about a foot tall. Irrigate until tops begin to brown, and then withhold water to let the plant dry naturally.

Harvesting too early will result in small bulbs, and harvesting too late results in cloves popping out of bulbs. One indication to start harvesting is when the leaves fall over and about half of the lower leaves turn brown. You can also just dig up a few bulbs and cut them in half; if the cloves fill the skins, then the bulbs are ready to harvest.

Use a garden fork to lift the plants out of the ground with shoots and bulbs attached. Knock off clumps of dirt and then let the plants air dry for a few weeks. This will dry the sheaths surrounding the bulbs, as well as the shoots and roots. The cloves should be firm to the touch. After curing the shoots can be cut a little above the bulb and the roots can be trimmed close to the bulb base.

Save several bulbs for planting next season. Store the remainder of garlic in a cool, dry, airy container (like a mesh bag) and place it in a well-ventilated spot. Next turn your attention to the cookbooks and have a great time whipping up all kinds of dishes with your home grown garlic!



Harvest garlic and let air dry for a few weeks.

November 15, 2012