



Planting Garlic

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October is harvest time in the garden, but it's planting time for garlic. Put that on your bulb-planting schedule, along with crocuses and tulips. The head of garlic you buy to eat is a cluster of garlic cloves, and each one makes a complete garlic bulb next summer if you plant it and let it overwinter in the soil. It's easy to break apart or "pop" a head of garlic and poke the separated cloves, pointy end up, in a bed of fertile soil.

So why not just put a few heads of garlic on the grocery list, separate the cloves, and plant those? Lots of people do. But sometimes the garlic sold as food is treated with a growth retardant to keep it from sprouting. And it's not always the best type to grow.

There are two main forms of garlic: softneck and hardneck. When the plant is growing, it's easy to tell the difference. The hardnecks create a flower stalk, and the softnecks make leaf stems only. Most commercial varieties are softnecks because they keep longer in storage. They're also the type to grow if you want to braid the tops of your garlic and hang them in your kitchen.

There are good reasons to grow the hardnecks, though. They're more primitive plants, with more complex, bold flavors. In the field, their flower stalks are usually removed when they form, to allow the plant to put more energy into the bulb. This practice has a double benefit, because garlic stems, or "scapes," are delicious to eat - great sauteed in olive oil or blended raw to make a fabulous pesto. Hardneck garlic is also the cook's best friend because the head forms a single circle of fat, easy-to-peel cloves. Softnecks have several circles of ever-diminishing size, each more tedious to peel than the last.

Hardnecks are a bit more winter-hardy, but both types should do fine in the Washington area. In fact, planting a bed of each is not a bad idea, to give you some softnecks for braiding as well as better storage.

At our place we have grown the same two varieties for years, a couple of unnamed Italian heirlooms given to us by our neighbor, Tony. They have done brilliantly for us, so we save the nicest heads each summer, and plant the fattest cloves. By doing this we're selecting for those best adapted to our growing conditions.

A great place to order organic garlic for planting is Filaree Garlic Farm in Okanogan, Wash. (509-422-6940, www.filareefarm.com [1]), which offers a large selection and good growing advice. You could also go to your nearest farmers market and buy some untreated heads. Tell the vendor you want them for seed, and you're sure to get some good tips, especially if it's from a farm near you with a similar climate and soil type.

As the harvested heads age, the flavor and potency of your stored garlic will diminish a bit, even before the cloves shrivel. But sow garlic seed now and summer's harvest will be long anticipated and, when it comes, will provide a generous supply of garlic of unforgettable flavor and pungency.

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