Grow It Now: Garlic

Lee Royer, Special to News Post

Garlic is fun and easy to grow and the time to begin is now. Here's what you do.

Choose the variety.
Garlic is available in three main types. Softneck (A. Allium sativum), hardneck or stiffneck (A. sativum var. ophioscorodon), and elephant (A.ampeloprasum). All are grown from what is called a bulb, actually a cluster of small individual crescent shaped bulbs called cloves. All varieties have few pests or diseases to worry about.

Softneck is the most common variety stocked in your local grocery. Commercial West Coast farmers grow softneck because it produces large bulbs of strong flavored garlic that doesn't send up a seed stalk (called a scape) and because it stores and ships well. It is more winter hardy than elephant but less hardy than stiffneck. Three bulbs should be enough to plant a 7 foot row with 4 inch spacing between cloves.

Elephant garlic is more closely related to leeks. It is less hardy than softneck or stiffneck but as the name implies, it produces a very large head of mild tasting, easy to peel garlic. If flowers appear they should be pinched off. Three bulbs should be enough to plant a 6 foot row with 6 inch spacing between cloves.

Stiffneck is an easy to peal, mild tasting garlic which grows well in Maryland. When the weather warms up a stalk called a scape will grow from the middle of the bulb. If allowed to mature the scape will produce a capsule of bulbils, which can be eaten or planted to grow into bulbs after two years. Scapes may be harvested for use as you would chives in cooking and on salads with the added benefit that energy goes into producing larger bulbs instead of bulbils. Three large bulbs should be enough to plant a 5 foot row with 4 inch spacing between cloves.

Purchase the garlic.
The quickest and easiest source is a producer farmers market. Any garlic for sale that was grown locally will work. In the small quantity needed for a home garden the cost will not be very different (if at all) between "seed" garlic and table garlic. You will save shipping costs and be sure it's a variety that grows well locally.

If you can't find a local source, try typing "garlic for sale" into a search engine. Hundreds of varieties are available from specialty gourmet outlets, garlic farms and seed companies. Fedco Bulbs, wwwfedcoseeds.com, and Johnny's Selected Seeds, www.johnnyseeds.com, both offer garlic. Seeds of Change, www.seedsofchange.com, offers traditional and heirloom varieties.

Planting garlic from a supermarket is not recommended because the origin is often unknown. It may be an imported variety developed for a warmer climate or carry disease.

EQUAL ACCESS PROGRAMS
EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

Divide into cloves.
A day or so before you plan to plant, carefully pry open the garlic bulbs by hand, separating them into a pile of individual cloves. If you are planting a quantity this will take some time. Try not to nick the cloves or disturb too much of the thin papery skin.

Don't plant damaged cloves. Set those aside to clean for use in the kitchen. You may place them in a jar of oil for immediate use or freezing within a week but avoid long term storage in oil at refrigerator or room temperatures as it could become contaminated with botulism. Commercial sellers use special preservatives in their oils to eliminate this risk.

Prepare a bed.
Like most vegetables, garlic grows best under full sun in loose crumbly fertile soil that is neither too wet nor too dry. Plant to suit your garden style in either wide row blocks or long narrow rows with walking space between or any combination, just keep the cloves 4 inches to 6 inches apart on each side. Loosen the soil by tilling or turning the earth with a spade, add compost if you have it, then use a hoe to create trenches approximately 4 inches deep.

Plant.
Place the cloves in the trenches basal end down, pointy end up. When all cloves are placed in the trenches replace the soil. After the ground freezes place a light layer of hay or straw mulch over the bed to prevent heaving. No need to remove this in the spring, the garlic will grow up through the mulch and it will prevent most weeds from sprouting, any that do can be easily pulled out of the mulch.

Harvest.
Nothing to do now but wait for harvest time! After the 4th of July, begin watching for yellowing and drying of the leaves. When the tops are almost dry, carefully dig up the bulbs with a garden fork. Don't pull them or cut the tops yet.

Store & start all over.
Place the whole plants in a single layer on screening or newspaper in a well-ventilated spot out of direct sunlight to dry before storage. When completely dry, cut off the roots and the tops to within an inch of the bulb for storage until planting again in the fall or using in the kitchen. Ideal storage conditions are 32 degrees with 65 to 75 percent humidity. Never store in plastic, the bulbs are alive and need to breath. Bulbs of the softneck variety may be braided together to hang dry. This should be done before the tops dry completely.

Garlic is possibly the easiest, most carefree edible plant you can grow and now you know how to grow your own forever.

For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the Maryland Cooperative Extension, 301-600-1596, or visit http://Frederick.umd.edu. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective & sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes & communities.