

GROWING ORGANIC GARLIC

MODERN GARLIC - Garlic ranks as the second most important Allium crop in the world (behind only onions). The species is divided into two subspecies (often called varieties) whose Latin names are: Ophioscorodon and Sativum, or more commonly called “Ophio” or “Hardneck” and “Softneck”. Ophio garlics, evolved directly from the wild garlic known as Allium longicuspis. Softneck garlic, which may also be called “Artichoke” (or sometimes “Italian” or “Silverskin”) garlic, evolved later from the ophio garlics. Softneck garlics are the most commonly grown garlics, but it all began with the ophios. The 2 main categories of garlic are further broken down, but we won’t go into that here.

THE 2 VARIETIES WE MOST OFTEN SELL:

“**Music**”, is a Porcelain Hardneck with superior flavor which produces a small number of very large, easy to peel, cloves. As with all hardnecks, Music will produce a false seedstalk called a “scape” in the Spring; when the scape first emerges it twists somewhat athletically into either a loose curl or a tight coil which later loses its curl and stands up straight. Music is not braidable. Its bulbs will keep for 4-8 months.

“**California Early White**” is an Artichoke softneck variety which originated in California. It tends to have an average of 4 clove layers and 12 or more cloves. It has a mild flavor, stores well and is braidable. Softneck garlic plants are shorter than hardneck varieties with more spreading rather than upright leaves. They do not normally produce a seed head, but often produce bulbils which protrude from the lower third of the stem. This type of bulb will keep for 6-9 months if stored properly.

SELECT the firmest, largest cloves to plant. “Crack”, or “Pop”, them apart using care not to bruise or puncture the clove. Bruises are targets for fungal organisms in the soil, and can also lead to more rapid dehydration. Try not to damage the “basal plate”, or base, of the clove. The basal plate is actually the true stem of the future garlic plant, and damage to the plate can lead to less vigorous root growth, or in more serious cases, clove rot. It is not necessary to remove the garlic “wrappers” (skin). Once “cracked”, cloves should be planted within a few days to avoid dehydration.

SOAKING seed garlic prior to planting will improve yield. Put 2 tablespoons powdered kelp extract and one level tablespoon baking soda (which is an anti-fungal) into one gallon of water and mix well. Soak the cloves in this liquid for 30 minutes or so.

NOTE: If you are planting more than one variety and do not want to confuse them, make a bowl of the mixture for each variety and label the bowls.

PREPARE the soil while cloves are soaking. Garlic prefers sandy loam soil, but will grow well in nearly any well drained, slightly acidic (6-7pH), fertile soil. The looser the composition of the soil, the larger the garlic. If planting in the ground, avoid planting in the same place you’ve previously grown garlic, onions or any other alliums for 3 years, because of the potential for spreading diseases like white rot. As always, we recommend adding organic worm castings to the soil, plus a handful of a balanced granular fertilizer. Garlic loves food and water, but it must have good drainage or it will rot.

PLANTING the cloves is the easiest part. Simply place the cloves into the soil, plate-side down, pointy-side up, and cover with 2” of soil. Press them in with a medium tamping. Plant cloves 4”-6” apart (Elephant Garlic, which is not a true garlic, but a leek, 8”-9” apart). Water well, and then only water again when needed, striving to keep the soil at about a 50% moisture level.

MULCHING helps moderate soil temperature and moisture levels, and will keep weeds at bay. A good mulch for garlic is chopped straw, which, in our mild climate, needs only to be layered on around ½” thick. It’s best to remove the mulch in the Spring, if any of it still remains.

WATERING & WAITING takes patience and commitment. 9 months is a long time to look after something that appears to be doing very little! Keep the moisture at around a 50% level until the final 2 weeks before harvesting – then withhold water completely.

CUTTING THE SCAPE is another subject of myriad opinions. The majority opinion is to cut the stalk so it does not go to seed but instead uses that energy to develop larger bulbs. Make the cut as close as possible, or it may grow back. The scape is edible and delicious!

EARLY TO MID-SPRING FERTILIZATION is a very good idea as this is when the bulbs begin plumping up. Side dress with a well balanced granular formula and water well. Another good fertilizer is fish/kelp formulas applied as a foliar spray every few weeks from Mid-March through early May.

HARVEST garlic by gently digging up the bulbs, being careful not to break the leaves. Do this when most of the leaves have turned brown and died. Usually the California Early White will be ready about a week before Music. Do not leave the harvested bulbs exposed to the sun! Do not wash them off! Gently brush or shake off some of the soil and hang them to dry somewhere with good circulation. We hang ours from a rafter in the garage where a good breeze comes up the driveway, but they are out of direct sunlight.

CURING takes 3-4 weeks. Just leave them hanging undisturbed. Do not cut off roots yet.

CLEANING is done once the bulbs are cured. Using a clean soft toothbrush, flick away at the dried soil with a down-and-outward movement being careful not to remove excessive layers of wrappers. Trim the roots off close to the basal plate. Hardneck leaves can be cut to an inch above the clove, and softneck leaves can either be braided to store hanging, or cut off.

STORING your garlic properly is important for a long “shelf-life”. Optimum storage temperature is 50 degrees F, and the relative humidity should be below 60%. One good way is to store the cloves in mesh bags (like onion sacks) in a cool dry area.

ENJOY!