

Get Ready for Garlic Planting

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Garlic is an amazing plant that is used heavily for cooking by some people and totally ignored by others. It is an ancient “crop” that dates back thousands of years yet many gardeners have had very limited success when they try to grow it. It may help gardeners to understand garlic better once they realize that it probably came from the same part of Asia that the ancestors of winter wheat arose from. Like winter wheat we need to plant it in October and harvest it in June.

You may also find it interesting that for the most part, most modern day garlic cultivars really don't bloom or flower and they don't produce seed. From a plant breeders point of view that is a nightmare and a fascination all rolled up in one. Improvements and adaptations come from small natural mutations that are selected. Through the thousands of years that garlic has been cultivated we have the varieties broken down into two subspecies, basically called hardneck and softneck and within that we have somewhere between seven to ten further divisions and hundreds, if not thousands, of varieties or cultivars.

Some of these cultivars are best planted in mild or warm climates with a limited amount of cold winter weather. Other cultivars HAVE to have freezing weather to be vernalized so that they will create a bulb with several cloves. This is important to know if you are thinking about trying to grow garlic. If you go into a grocery store and buy garlic, all you've going to know is that it's garlic. You won't know what type, you certainly won't know what cultivar and you'll have no idea if it's been treated with sprout retardants. Most fresh garlic is grown in California and is likely a softneck cultivar and most likely it's California Early or California Late. If you want to try growing some garlic, buy a named variety from a reputable source and there's better varieties to grow in Kansas than either one of these!

In general we are going to plant garlic the last half of October through about the first week of November. You want to get your garlic garden tilled up in the coming weeks. If you are planting a few rows, make the rows about a foot apart then plant the cloves (pointy end up) about two inches deep and six inches apart. Cover the cloves with soil, spread some fertilizer over the top, mulch it with hay or straw and you're ready for winter. Be sure to fertilize it a second time just as the new growth starts showing up in the spring. A few plants may send up some leaves this fall, most often they don't. It's no problem either way!

In general, hardneck types have fewer cloves per bulb but bigger cloves. They are also more highly prized for flavor, but their storage life after harvest is usually only four to six months. A couple of hardneck cultivars I've been pleased with include Chesnok Red (a standard purple stripe variety), Music (a porcelain variety) and Spanish Roja or German Red (both rocambole varieties). Just remember that after harvesting, drying and processing you will want to use these amazing bulbs first and within a few months.

Softneck cultivars are generally either called artichoke types or silverskin types. These will have more cloves per bulb but they'll be slightly smaller. But these types can last nine to twelve months in storage. I have had good success with Inchelium Red (an artichoke type) and Silver White (a silverskin type). If you've never grown garlic before I'd recommend planting 1/4 to 1/2 pound of two to four different types. This won't require much space in your garden. If you need to know where to order from please contact me at the Extension Office as I can help you find some good planting stock suppliers. If you enjoy gardening but you've never really planted garlic, this may be the fall to give it a try!