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A Weekly Column from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach

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For Immediate Release

It's Time to Plant Garlic

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Garlic has been cultivated for thousands of years but it took some time for this smelly bulb to be accepted as a seasoning. Now, of course, it is a culinary staple in many kitchens.

Garlic is a member of the onion family. Cultivars are broadly classified as either hardneck or softneck. Hardneck garlic is thought to be more closely related to wild garlic and usually produces a flower stalk called a scape. The hardneck varieties handle our cold weather better than softnecks though there are a few softnecks suitable for growing in our climate. Many softneck cultivars are grown for commercial production in California. These are the garlic bulbs you find most often in the supermarket.

The best time to plant garlic in our region is October/early November. Garlic bulbs need a cold period in order for the cloves to develop properly. When planting garlic, place it in an area that will receive plenty of sun and has good drainage. Garlic does not compete well with weeds so keep the area well-weeded.

Garlic is propagated by planting the individual cloves. Separate the cloves a day or two before planting. The largest cloves will be the most productive. Garlic is considered a "heavy feeder". If needed, work into the soil some all-purpose garden fertilizer before starting. Plant cloves about two inches deep and six to eight inches apart. Make sure the pointed end faces up. When finished planting, put down several inches of an organic mulch such as straw to insulate the cloves over the winter.

If planting hardneck cultivars, the scape begins to form in midsummer. Remove the scape when it begins to curl to encourage bulb growth rather than flower development. Tender scapes can be chopped up and put in salads or other dishes to add a mild, garlic flavor.

Garlic is ready to harvest when the foliage turns brown usually in late summer. Cure garlic by drying it in a warm, moisture-free location that has good air circulation. When the tops have dried, cut the foliage to one inch above the bulb. Also, remove the roots and any remaining soil. Store bulbs in an open crate or mesh bag in a cool, dry place. Properly dried and stored hardneck varieties can last up to three months. Softneck garlic has a longer shelf life and can usually be stored up to six months.

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