



shelf life:

GARLIC

Celebrating the life cycle
of nature's most fragrant pearl.

Cultivated for at least 5,000 years, garlic has certainly seen its share of uses: antiseptic, currency, offering to the gods, vampire stopper. And while it has been enjoyed as a food for just as many millennia, it was long associated in the U.S. with unfamiliar immigrant food and was not always a member of “polite society.”

BY JESSICA MUELLER

Today, however, there is hardly a respectable kitchen without a head or two mellowing on the counter. We talked to Walt Lyons of www.TheGarlicStore.com, an online retailer of garlic (mostly organic) for gardeners, chefs and home cooks to find out more about this tasty bulb. Today there are at least 400 different varieties of garlic, and about 50 types are being actively cultivated in the U.S. (The Garlic Store boasts the same number). While it may seem overwhelming, there are three major classifications of garlic worth getting to know.

Softneck garlic, with its robust, long-lasting flavor, is what we usually find in supermarkets. Generally white, this type of garlic is identifiable by the absence of a central woody stalk. As you make your way through a head, its large cloves give way to nearly miniscule cloves that can be difficult to work with.

Organic and specialty growers put most of their efforts into **hardneck** varieties. Prized by gourmets, hardnecks feature more uniformly sized cloves growing around a central woody stalk. Hardneck garlic often has a purple-tinged exterior. The cloves neatly break away from the stalk and are easier to peel than softneck cloves.

Elephant garlic is not really garlic at all, but a relative of the leek. It can grow to be the size of a grapefruit and has a milder flavor than regular garlic. This is usually the type of garlic that people roast to use as a spread.

All of these varieties are harvested in the late summer, but thankfully we can get sneak previews before then. The first sign of the developing bulb appears in May. Called **green** or **spring** garlic, these immature shoots look like a scallion and have a much milder flavor than developed garlic. Lyons recommends using them “whenever the texture of scallions

and the taste of garlic are desired.”

Hardneck and elephant garlic begin to blossom in June, but before their full flowering, long green scapes, or pods, sprout up from the ground. Crunchy and with a strong garlic flavor, scapes are a tasty and attractive addition to stir-fries, pastas and salads. Their curling, graceful silhouettes are even lovely in flower arrangements.

choosing and storing

If *perfectly* stored, softneck varieties keep for as long as eight months, while hardneck varieties last only about three to four months. You can tell the difference between the two by looking at the top (pointed end) of the head. The stalk of hardnecks pokes bluntly through the



There are many ways to prepare garlic: slicing, mincing, crushing, or even grating against the tines of a fork.

cloves, while softnecks taper upwards into soft peaks. Store all varieties of garlic in a cool and dry place with plenty of ventilation, and keep heads unbroken (loose cloves last only a few weeks). Never store garlic in the refrigerator. The cold air will bring the garlic out of its dormancy and encourage it to grow green shoots (which are unrelated to green garlic and scapes). Even properly stored garlic will eventually grow shoots—

though Lyons paternally reminds us that “it’s just trying to live.” Depending on the humidity in your home, garlic will also let you know it is past its prime by drying out (it will feel hollow) or molding.

When shopping for fresh garlic, choose heads that have no odor, are firm and are neatly contained in many layers of papery skin. Softneck garlic has more layers than hardneck—one of the features that makes it last longer.

using fresh garlic

Before fresh garlic is cut, its flavor and heat are mere possibilities. When the knife meets the clove, cell structure is disrupted and previously isolated enzymes mingle. A reaction occurs, and allicin, the enzyme that makes garlic “garlicky,” is born. The wielder of the knife actually has a lot of control over this counter-top chemistry: the more you chop, the stronger the flavor. A clove simply cut in half, for example, is quite mild, while mashed, pressed or puréed garlic is very strong. There is even a noticeable difference between sliced and minced garlic.

Heat breaks down garlic’s flavor the furthest, and sweet, buttery roasted garlic is a testament to that. To roast, simply chop off the top inch or so of one whole head. Sprinkle with some salt, pepper and olive oil, wrap in foil or set in a garlic roaster, and bake it “low and slow” for one hour at about 325°F. Lyons recommends topping the garlic with just a hint of sherry before roasting. This helps temper any bitter flavor that may arise.

As the days get longer, treat yourself to a little spring cleaning. Toss any musty heads and orphaned cloves lurking around your pantry and check farmers’ markets for treats like green garlic and scapes. If treated kindly, this ancient allium may provide a culinary renaissance for you.