

Sarah Brown (with Conner Voss) relishing in the sweet delight of garlic, among other pleasures. She shares her garlic secrets here.

By Sarah Brown

Rarely is a meal started in my kitchen without garlic. It is such a full flavor in itself and a no-brainer to add to almost any dish. So why not add it to your garden?

In my experience, the springtime excitement of getting my garden in has the tendency to quickly fill all plantable space. I want to get the biggest bang for my buck and I can't hide my tendency towards instant (or relatively instant) gratification. This is quite problematic for garlic because unlike most of the plants in our vegetable garden it is planted in the fall and stays in the ground over winter until the following summer months. It's a commitment of space that few are willing

to give for a crop that might only last us a few meager meals and has all these odd planting instructions. There are those of us out there that have learned that taking that initial step, throwing in a clove or two, has far greater returns than just a couple heads of garlic.

For one, if you've ever looked at the fall/winter seed catalogs that show up right about when you are turning all your spring beds, there are a huge diversity of garlic varieties to choose from. The largest factor to consider is hardneck v. softneck, and quite literally, that is the difference. Softneck garlic tends to have smaller cloves, better storage quality, and less pungent flavor while hardneck have shorter storage life,

larger cloves, and a wide range of flavor and pungency options. Another factor to consider is whether you enjoy garlic scapes or whistles that hardneck garlic so generously give us in early spring. In our household, we generally have to compromise with half and half. Having a fresh garlicky flavor in early June is quite a treat. After that decision you're left to decide the variety on your own. We experiment every year.

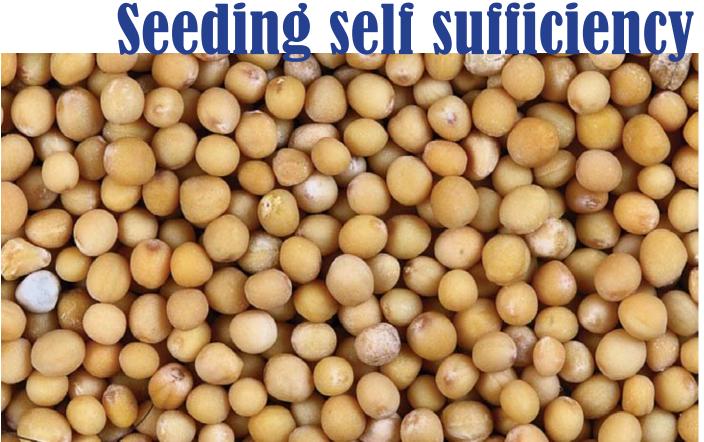
#### Soil

When it comes to preparing your soil for garlic, it is very much like other garden vegetables. You want to pay close attention to drainage because its roots will be over-

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By Randall Cass

This year, I'm saving seed from my garden, and you should too. Saving seed increases biodiversity and provides your garden with varieties better adapted to your region. Furthermore, with multinational corporations patenting seed and declaring ownership over specific crop varieties, seed saving is becoming increasingly urgent. Big agribusiness has already successfully sued farmers for saving patented seed, even in cases of unintentional cross-pollination from neighboring fields (see *Monsanto Canada Inc. vs. Schmeiser*). As a conscious organic gardener, saving seed is a way for me to both ensure a more successful harvest and protect my growing future.

Selecting plants to save seed from is a bit of a garden popularity contest – and you want the one voted most likely to succeed. Consider each plant's hardiness, color, deliciousness, and overall vitality. Additionally, remember that some varieties will cross-pollinate (for example, broccoli and cabbage) so they should not be grown simultaneously or they should be well separated. The whole process can be overwhelming at first, but here are some easy plants from which to save seed to get you started.

## Steps for beginners

### **Beans & Peas**

1. Harvest pods from the plant when they are dry and the seeds are rattling inside. In the case of beans, if you can bite into an individual bean without making a dent, then it's ready.

- 2. Pull whole plants out of ground and either hang the stocks up or lay them out on a screen to dry indoors for about two weeks.
- Next remove the beans from the pods by hand or by thrashing.
- 4. Store in a cool dry place. Bean and pea seed should be viable for about three years.

## **Peppers**

- Harvest peppers for seed when they are mature and fully colored.
- 2. Cut open the pepper and remove the cluster of seeds in the center.
- 3. Remove the seeds from the cluster by hand and lay them out on a sheet or a piece of newspaper to dry.
- 4. Allow seeds two weeks to dry. They are ready to be stored when seeds snap when bent in half if they fold without breaking they are not dry enough. Pepper seeds are viable for about two years.

#### Lettuce

1. After the plant has bolted and produced a flower head, wait until its seeds are thoroughly dried (12–24 days after flowering) before harvesting the stalk and placing it in a paper

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## Seed saving across varieties

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- bag. Since different plants will be ready to harvest at different times, if you are concerned that the seeds will begin to disperse before you can collect them, you can tie a bag around the flower head to catch falling seed.
- 2. Separate the seed from the chaff or "lettuce feathers" with a fine mesh screen. Other methods for separating lettuce chaff include winnowing (the process of pouring the bag's contents into another container in front of a blowing fan letting the chaff to blow away and the seeds to drop into the container) or simply rubbing the chaff away in the palms of your hands.
- 3. Store the tiny lettuce seeds in a cool dry place they should be viable for up to five years.

## Squash

1. Allow squash to after-ripen off the vine for a month or two before harvesting its seed.

- 2. Slice the squash in half and scoop out the seed. Rinse the seeds to remove excess pulp, and separate the good seeds (the plump ones) from the bad seeds (the flat ones).
- Spread the seeds out across a screen or a sheet of newspaper and allow them at least two weeks to dry. After storing, the seed should be viable for up to four years.

## Storage

When storing seeds, the most important thing to remember is to keep them cool and dry. Seeds are extremely sensitive to moisture, so storage containers should be close to airtight to prevent moisture from seeping in. Seed envelopes placed in old jars or plastic tubs with secure lids work well for seed storage. Don't forget to label everything clearly and never store seeds unless they are completely dry.

Saving seed is just one more way for

conscious gardeners to stick it to the man and take back control of their growing future. Below are some books and helpful organizations to help you get started.

#### Resources:

- Seed to Seed by Suzanne Ashworth This
  is an easy to follow and comprehensive
  guide to saving vegetable seed.
- Breed Your Own Vegetable Varieties by
   Carol Deppe Another awesome guide
   that focuses more on developing your
   varieties through different pollination
   techniques.
- The Organic Seed Alliance: www.seedalliance.org - A nonprofit dedicated to advocating for the ethical development and stewardship of seed.
- Seed Savers Exchange: www.seedsavers. org - A nonprofit that promotes saving heirloom seed and whose members save and exchange rare varieties.

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# Garlic growing made easy

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wintering during the soggiest part of the year. It is ideal to plant garlic in an area that had a summer cover crop in it, and has not been planted to anything in the *Allium* (Garlic, onions, leeks) family for at least three years. I like following my spring peas with a quick buckwheat cover crop and then garlic.

## Planting

You want your garlic to develop a strong enough root system that it can weather the storms of winter. In order to provide ample time, plan on planting in September or October. To form the largest heads, space your cloves 6-8" apart. Larger cloves form larger heads. A trick we've learned is to alternate between large and small cloves and space them 4" apart. In early spring when the garlic has put on ample green growth, you can harvest the smaller cloves as green garlic which are great sauted or pureed into dips.

After planting, mulch your garlic bed with a thick covering of straw 2-6" deep. This will protect your soil from the compaction of winter rains, keep weeds down,

and add a nice organic matter to incorporate into your soil after harvest.

#### Maintenance

As the days lengthen in spring, you will notice increased green growth from your plants. If you applied enough mulch, you should have little weeding to do and little watering. Now is the time to harvest any smaller stalks as green garlic. It is also the time your plants could use a boost to get out of their winter of slow growth. Foliar feeding is a great fertility complement to garlic. At this point in its growth, you want to grow the largest garlic greens you can because all the energy stored in the leaves will eventually travel back down to form a bulb.

Around late May or early June, you will start seeing a curly stalk emerge from any hardneck varieties. This is what you hear referred to as a scape or whistle. Pinch these off and enjoy them as "garlic scallions." Rather than have the plants energy form flowers and seeds, you want that redirected into a larger garlic head.

### Harvest

At this point, you want to withhold water. Moisture, coupled with heat will encourage fungal growth and because this is going to be a stored crop you want them as clean as possible. When the outer leaves of the plant die back you are very close to harvest. Three to four green leaves will be enough to form the paper outer covering of the garlic head. If you wait too long, you run the risk of having no covering and exposed cloves.

After harvest, we hang our garlic in bunches of five in a cool dark well ventilated place for about two weeks. Once cured, we cut their roots off and brush them off with a nail brush. You can begin eating them at any time but proper curing will ensure a good storage crop for you to work off of for many months to come.

Sarah feels most inspired and alive when out in her garden with her husband and four legged friends. You can follow her adventures in food growing at www.digginrootsfarm.com.

