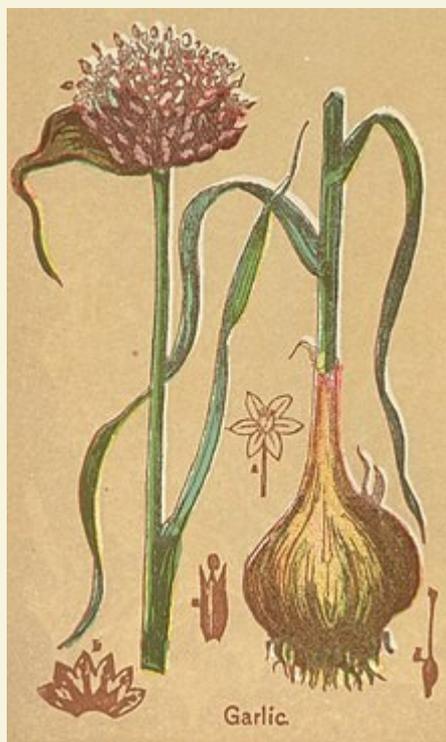


The East London Garden Society

Plant Facts

History of Garlic



Garlic (*Allium sativum*) is a species in the onion genus. Its close relatives include the onion, shallot, leek, chive, Welsh onion and Chinese onion. It is native to Central Asia and north eastern Iran and has long been a common seasoning worldwide, with a history of several thousand years of human consumption and use.

It was known to ancient Egyptians and has been used as both a food flavouring and a traditional medicine. China produces 80% of the world's supply of garlic. The word garlic derives from Old English, *garlēac*, meaning *gar* (spear) and leek, as a 'spear-shaped leek'.

Garlic plants are usually hardy and not affected by many pests or diseases. They are also said to repel rabbits and moles. The California Department of Food and Agriculture conducts a certification programme to assure freedom from nematode and white rot disease, two pathogens that can both destroy a crop as well as remain in the soil indefinitely, once introduced.

Garlic may also suffer from *pink root*, a typically non-fatal disease that stunts the roots and turns them pink or red. The larvae of the leek moth attack garlic by mining into the leaves or bulbs.

The phytochemicals responsible for the sharp flavour of garlic are produced when the plant's cells are damaged. When a cell is broken by chopping, chewing or crushing, enzymes stored in its cells trigger the breakdown of several sulphur-containing compounds.

The resultant compounds are responsible for the sharp or hot taste and strong smell of garlic. Some of the compounds are unstable and continue to react over time. A member of the onion family, garlic has by far the highest concentrations of initial reaction products, making garlic much more potent.

Numerous cuneiform records show that garlic has been cultivated for at least 4,000 years. The use of garlic in China and Egypt also dates back thousands of years. Well-preserved garlic was found in the tomb of Tutankhamun. It was consumed by ancient Greek and Roman soldiers, sailors, and rural classes according to Pliny the Elder. Garlic was placed by the ancient Greeks on the piles of stones at crossroads, as a supper.

Garlic used to be rare in traditional English cuisine, though it is said to have been grown in England before 1548 but has been a common ingredient in Mediterranean Europe. Translations of the c. 1300 Assize of Weights and Measures (an English statute generally dated to the 13th century) indicate a passage dealing with standardised units of garlic production.

Garlic is sometimes thought of as a panacea for many health conditions.