



The Onion Family **Gary Westlake**

We are coming up to the best time to plant garlic. Garlic belong to the onion family which everyone should recognize since these plants all have a similar character and smell to the common onion.

Although in the south they can plant garlic in early spring, we normally plant it in the fall after the first frost. We do this so that the bulbs have enough time to develop roots but cold enough that the shoots do not break the surface. Traditionally, you plant garlic on the shortest day of the year and harvest on the longest, but this is just an easy way to remember rather than the exact timing.

Just before planting, crack the bulbs apart into separate cloves, keeping a bit of the basal plate intact. Use only the largest cloves so they will have a chance to form reasonable sized bulbs by harvest. Plant into double rows or even 4 to 6 across and about 8 inches apart. Make sure the pointy end is up about 2 inches below the surface and mulch with about 4 inches of chopped leaves. Garlic likes even moisture and not too wet. Harvest next year when about 40% of the leaves are brown. You are looking for a well wrapped bulb with the skins intact for good storage.

Onions for eating can either be planted as seeds or plants started indoors in the spring or as sets. The can be harvested early for spring onions or later in the season for the larger bulbs.

There are also the mild tasting leeks in the onion family. You can plant them as seeds or small plants in the early spring and harvest in the fall. It helps to hill them up later in the season.

But the onion family also contains some decorative members including varieties of Allium and chives.

One allium that brings visitors up short to ask “what is that” is called *Allium christophii*. This allium has a large ball shaped cluster of flowers on the top of the stem with star shapes around the surface. There are also the more common *Allium giganteum* with its tall purple globes standing above everything else in a June garden. There are short alliums with large balls and short alliums with small balls. They come in a variety of colours and shapes. You can also use them in dried or fresh flower arrangements.

The one thing to watch out for with alliums is they tend to be prolific self seeders. There is a tendency to leave the heads up since they look great, but if you leave them too long you will be sorry. You will have alliums all over. One thing you can do is pull the flower before the seeds mature and stick it back in the ground. I even heard of someone who spray painted the heads purple so that she had a fairly

permanent flower. We have not tried this but you might like to. Another problem with alliums is that the foliage tends to die as they flower, which can be unsightly if you do not plant them back in the flower bed where the foliage can be hidden by other plants.

Alliums also form offset bulbs easily so you had better decide where you want them because once established, it is difficult to remove every last little bulblet if you change your mind.

With all their faults, there is nothing quite like the sight of big balls of purple standing high above the garden.

I look on chives as mostly decorative although you can cut some of them for cooking purposes. They form a very nice carpet of pink flowers that can be sheared off when finished so they can rebloom. Garlic chives which have a flat leaf, also have a flower that looks a lot like a small *Agapanthus*.

In our garden we also have an onion relative called curly onion in which the leaves curl. This plant is low growing, about the height of chives and makes an interesting and different looking mound.

Another oddity of the onion family is *Allium cepa*, the Egyptian Onion, Walking Onion or Top Set Onion. These onions form the bulbs at the top and when they get heavy they bend over to the ground starting more onions. This way they can 'walk' all over your garden.

Whether you are growing them for the table or as decorative plants, you will find many interesting members of the onion family to try.

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