

Bell County Master Gardeners
Tip of the Week
By Candy Mullen
"Garlic, the Versatile Herb, part 2"

Garlic has been used as both food and medicine in many cultures for thousands of years, dating at least as far back as the time that the Giza pyramids were built. Garlic is still grown in Egypt, but the Syrian variety is the kind most esteemed now. Its use in China was first mentioned in A.D. 510. It was consumed by ancient Greek and Roman soldiers, sailors, and rural classes and, according to Pliny the Elder, by the African peasantry. Galen eulogizes it as the "rustic's theriac" (cure-all).

Garlic was rare in traditional English cuisine (though it is said to have been grown in England before 1548) and has been a much more common ingredient in Mediterranean Europe. Garlic was placed by the ancient Greeks on the piles of stones at crossroads, as a supper for Hecate. A similar practice of hanging garlic, lemon and red chili at the door or in a shop to ward off potential evil is still very common in India. In ancient Egypt, the onion and garlic were worshiped as a deity!

Much of the garlic production in the United States is centered on Gilroy, California, which calls itself the "garlic capital of the world".

Domestically, garlic is stored warm (above 18°C [64°F]) and dry to keep it dormant (so that it does not sprout). It is traditionally hung; softneck varieties are often braided in strands, called "plaits" or grappes. Garlic will keep longer if the tops remain attached.

In 1858, Louis Pasteur observed garlic's antibacterial activity, and it was used as an antiseptic to prevent gangrene during World War I and World War II. More recently, it has been found from a clinical trial that a mouthwash containing 2.5% fresh garlic shows good antimicrobial activity, although the majority of the participants reported an unpleasant taste and halitosis. Garlic cloves are used as a remedy for infections (especially chest problems), digestive disorders, and fungal infections such as thrush.

Today garlic is used to help prevent heart disease, including atherosclerosis (plaque buildup in the arteries that can block the flow of blood and possibly lead to heart attack or stroke), high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and to improve the immune system. Garlic may also protect against cancer.

While the science is not conclusive, research shows promise for garlic in the areas of cancer protection and heart-related risk factors for patients. Garlic is very rich in antioxidants.

How to grow garlic here is next week's topic. Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com