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Vitamin G

Plant your own personal stash of garlic in October.

My goal is never to buy garlic — except when I'm away from my stash. For the last seven years, my homegrown garlic crop has spared me the humiliation of paying for something that should be free. When I do get stuck paying, it feels like I'm lying down with a prostitute.

I don't expect anyone else to share my fanaticism, but I do hope that some of you take a stab at garlic cultivation. In addition to saving — in the case of heavy users like me, a couple hundred bucks — the homegrown is by definition tastier and more rewarding. And for those who like to engage the informal economy of barter, garlic is a valuable commodity. I've currently got a deal in the works by which my garlic will be exchanged for deer meat. This is good timing, since I'm down to my last pack of venison from last year's hunt. Garlic offers the added bonus of rushing out of the gate in early April, quickly growing to knee height, while your neighbors are still hunched over their microscopic peas, carrots and spinach. You will feel like a rock star, and your neighbors will comment. When they do, pull a blade of grass (if it's tall enough), stick it in your teeth, nod your head and reflect, "Yep, crop's lookin' all right this year."

The other day I went into my garage and did a head count. Two hundred and thirty-four heads of garlic, hanging in bunches from the ceiling. That may sound like a lot, but considering how much I've already used, it's clear that between cooking, canning, bartering, gift-making and grazing housemates, I burn through more than a head of garlic every day. It needs to last until mid-May, when you can start eating the new garlic flowers. Soon after, the immature heads will be big enough to pull and eat.

Do the math. There are roughly seven and a half months from now until mid-May. Multiply seven and a half by 30 days at a bulb per day and you get 225 bulbs that I will need in order to avoid paying for it. I have 234. This leaves me in a severe garlic crisis, because it leaves me hardly any for planting.

And planting is the priority. It has to be. I need to plant enough so that next year I won't have this problem, so I'm aiming for 600 heads. One clove of garlic, planted in the fall, will grow into a head by next summer. So I need to plant 600 cloves of garlic. With my variety — Killarney Red — each head contains an average of seven plantable cloves. Six hundred heads divided by seven cloves

per head equals 85 heads that I need to dedicate to planting. In order to increase the size of future generations, I plant the biggest ones. This means that from now until May I have to ration myself on 149 small and medium sized heads of garlic. I might have to pay for it.

In our climate zone, October is the month for garlic planting. The things you need to figure out ASAP are where you are going to plant, and what. The *where* should be an area of your garden, currently vacant, that you are willing to dedicate for nine months toward garlic.

Pull out the weeds, dig it up, mix in compost and manure, and do whatever else you need to do to make it buff and ripe for planting.

The *what*, obviously, is garlic, but what kind? Commercial growers usually save and replant their seed most years, and then order new seed every several years to break any disease cycles that may be brewing. I recommend to home gardeners that they buy their seed at the Farmers Market. Using healthy, locally grown garlic ensures that you are going with a variety that will produce healthy offspring in your home climate. You can also get it at the store, but just make sure it's regionally grown. If you plug California garlic into an Oregon growing season, you're asking for trouble. The reverse can be true as well. It's worth experimenting with different varieties in small batches, but don't bet the farm on an alien.

The fact that you can plant store-bought garlic is a reminder that garlic, like potatoes, oysters, onions and many of the finer things in life, is a live food. This means that when you eat garlic, it is about as fresh as it gets.

When choosing your garlic, look for characteristics that are important to you. Flavor is one, obviously. Another is easy peeling. I like to be able to peel garlic like I peel my women — in one stroke. I don't have time to spend all day picking off cling-on shreds. Another important characteristic is the size and shape of the cloves. Small cloves make small heads. Big cloves — even from small heads — make big heads. I like heads in which the cloves form a symmetrical ring around a central stalk.

I highly recommend that you purchase the book *Growing Great Garlic* by Ron Engeland, who also sells garlic seed and gives away a wealth of information at his website: www.filareefarm.com

Chef Boy Ari, also known as Ari LaVaux, is currently living and cooking in Missoula, Mont.



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