

# Know your onions

Discovering the megawatt flavours of home-grown bulbs was an delightful experience for the whole family

RACHEL DE THAME



Grace and flavour: above, start planting garlic in the next months. Right, Rachel's daughter Olivia helps out



Strange things happen when you discover the joys of growing your own produce. Suddenly, the perfection of a single onion becomes blindingly obvious; the layers of overlapping scales, the silken sheen of its skin and, above all, the simple yet fascinating way the bulb itself functions and swells. The fact that such a miracle of nature can be eaten — onions and garlic are core ingredients, without which most dishes would be bland and uninteresting — seems almost superfluous.

While I could content myself with its beauty, flavour must be the ultimate aim when growing for the plate, and

there is no harsher or more honest judge of taste than my husband, Gerard. His reaction to this year's crop at our former farm in west Oxfordshire was unequivocal. He is a serious gourmet, the cook of the family and notoriously fussy, so the immortal phrase "Your onions are sensational!" was no mean compliment.

He may not have been as effusive about my garlic, but we had excellent results with that, too. This was a first for me, and if you are unsure about dishes which kind to grow, and can devote sufficient garden space to your own mini trial — a good time to plant is over the next couple of months — the Garlic Lovers' Planting Selection (£22.50), from

the Garlic Farm, based on the Isle of Wight, is an excellent way to try different varieties, producing about 100 fully grown bulbs.

Garlic is an increasingly popular crop for British gardeners, with many varieties growing well in our climate. Indeed, it needs a period of cold weather early on to kick-start it into action. There are two types: hardnecks, which often have a mauve or pinkish tinge and an intense flavour, and softnecks, which have many individual cloves to each bulb and can be stored for a longer period.

I was impressed by 'Lautrec Wight', a hardneck that marries attractive rose-mauve colouring with intensity of

flavour, and by the softneck 'Solent Wight', which is a good keeper. You can put them in the ground any time between October and early spring, and they'll be ready to harvest between May and July, with some varieties storing into the following winter and beyond.

Whether you choose to sow this side of Christmas or next spring, it is important to prepare the ground properly. We have long raised beds filled with well-drained soil, supplemented by a home-made compost, and with a neutral pH — the Garlic Farm recommends adding lime if you have acidic soil — but they can be grown directly in the ground if the drainage is good. Break the bulbs into individual cloves just prior to

planting and, spacing them 4in-6in apart (larger cloves need a bit more space), push them 1in or so into the soil. Most literature recommends leaving up to 18in between rows, but I packed them in a bit more tightly, probably 12in-14in, depending on clove size, and the results were still good.

I love the long stems of the hardnecks, which wind sinuously skyward, each tipped with an arrow-sharp bud. If you remove them by June, this will concentrate the plant's energies on developing the cluster of precious cloves. Before you throw them on the compost heap, try eating the cut stems, which have a fresh garlic taste when seasoned and sautéed in butter.

This year, I'll take care to grow the garlic and onions in raised beds adjacent to the ones I used this year, moving them further down the kitchen garden annually. Rotating crops helps to prevent the build-up of diseases and pests such as eelworm within the soil, and is good garden practice when growing fruit and veg.

The misleadingly named elephant garlic, which is not a true garlic, but is certainly enormous, and delicious roasted, is included in the Garlic Farm's selection. To get the biggest bulbs, you'll need to give them plenty of space (I planted two cloves in the row) and remove developing flower heads. They can also be sited with decorative plants in the herbaceous border, where their purple flowers can reach 5ft in height.

I grew plenty of shallots, too — the elongated bulbs of French 'Jermor' are my husband's preferred variety — and regularly sowed spring onions, which take up little room and are best pulled out when young and sweet. 'Guardsman' is a reliable variety that proved popular with everyone around the table.

Back to my "sensational" onions. This year, I put in 100 each of an old favourite, the golden-skinned 'Sturton', another yellow type that was new to me, 'Marshalls New Fen Globe', and the delicious red-skinned 'Red Baron'. To speed things up — I didn't get around them in a bit until mid-April — I used sets, which are tiny immature onions, rather than seed. If you are planting in spring, it is a good idea to buy heat-prepared sets. These have been treated to prevent bolting (early flowering) and encourage a lengthy growth period and sizeable bulbs.

I'm about to get a head start for 2010 by putting in a block of sets right now. Marshalls Seeds is offering five types suitable for autumn planting. I like the sound of the Duo Pack (£5.90): 100 sets each of 'Troy', an early yellow-skinned onion with uniform round bulbs, and 'Red Cross', which has contrasting rings of white flesh, edged with red, that would look lovely in a salad.

'Electric', another attractive red onion with pink-tinged flesh, which will harvest in early July, is one of four autumn-planted onions on offer from Thompson & Morgan. I'm also keen to try 'Senshyu', a Japanese overwintered variety with a slightly flattened shape. Both are £3.99 for 50-75 sets.

These will overwinter and should be ready three or four weeks earlier than spring-sown onions. Each baby onion is pushed into the soil, with only the tip peeping through the surface. If you have problems with birds pulling them out, cover the sets with a layer of fleece until they are properly rooted. This also helps when starting them off in autumn, keeping a bit of warmth in the soil should temperatures drop suddenly.

Once they are in the ground, cultivation is easy. Watering is unnecessary at this time of year, although they may need a drink during hot spells early next summer. Do keep on top of the weeding. There's a lot of bare soil around the bulbs, and weeds can quickly get the upper hand.

It's important to harvest garlic and onions at the right stage, generally during June and July, when the leaves are



String it out: 'Red Baron' onions are delicious in salads

Marianne Majerus, Rachel de Thame, Oliver Mathews/S&O Mathews

yellowing and starting to die back. Too early and the bulbs will not have reached their full potential. Too late and they won't store well, with individual garlic cloves starting to separate from the bulb. We gathered armfuls of onions — my youngest daughter, who is not yet four, almost disappeared beneath the pile of flopping leaves as she carried them from the raised beds to the covered hard standing in front of the stables, where they were to be stored.

We laid the garlic, the shallots and, finally, the onions in a single layer on the flagstones, where they have protection from the rain. In fine weather, I dragged them all into the sun, allowing the foliage to dry out completely prior to storage. With so many to move, this became quite a chore. I tried to per-

suade Gerard to construct some sort of large timber frames and staple on a sheet of chicken wire, so I could lay the onions and garlic, leaves and all, on top, then simply pull them across the ground as the weather dictated. Alas, the frames never materialised... but perhaps next year.

Eventually, our crop was strung together, after a fashion, and hung up in the cool darkness of the stable and garden shed. We should be good for onions and garlic for many months, and it is a joy to pop into the stable and grab another string, rather than trudge round the supermarket.

Three hundred onions is about right for a family of six, plus friends. Or at least it would have been had my 18-year-old son not tied several dozen

to the fence and used them for shooting practice with his air gun.

✦ Suppliers: The Garlic Farm (01983 863378, [thegarlicfarm.co.uk](http://thegarlicfarm.co.uk)); Marshalls Seeds (01480 443390, [marshalls-seeds.co.uk](http://marshalls-seeds.co.uk)); Thompson & Morgan (0844 248 5283, [thompson-morgan.com](http://thompson-morgan.com))

✦ *The Complete Book of Garlic* by Ted Jordan Meredith (Timber Press £25) is a serious monograph for garlic-lovers: It will delight in its detail, despite being geared toward the American grower

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