

The Not-So-Stinky “Stinking Rose”

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*Sith garlick then hath power to save from death,
Bear with it though it makes unsavory breath;
And scorn not garlick, like to some that think,
It only makes men wink, and drink and stink.*

Sir John Harrington, *The English Doctor* (1609)

A member of the lily family, an herb, and a cousin to the onion, the leek, chives, and shallots, the stinking rose—as garlic has been known—has a long history as a flavoring for food and as a medical wonder and a protector. Native to central Asia, garlic (from the Old English word *garleac*, meaning “spear leek”) appeared in the Chinese Sanskrit writings from about 3000 BC. Egyptians worshipped garlic and used it in their embalming practices. Clay models of garlic bulbs were found in the tomb of Tutankhamen. It has even been used as currency.

Other early civilizations, including the Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, and Vikings, found many uses for the aromatic herb beyond its cooking and medicinal applications.

Folklore, of course, tells us that garlic hung by windows and doors wards off vampires and witches and protects against the Evil Eye. Dreaming of garlic is considered good luck, but dreaming of giving it away invites bad luck. Bullfighters wear its cloves around their necks as a protection from the bulls. Seafarers include garlic on their trips over water to prevent drowning. Mountain climbers, wishing to ensure the best weather, bring garlic along. It wards off jealous nymphs who terrorize pregnant or engaged women. Its aphrodisiacal powers have been touted since the Elizabethan era.

In the United States, garlic lost its popularity at the turn of the 20th century partly because of its pungent aroma and strong taste, and by those who thought ethnic foods were without class. But since 1940, the herb has slowly regained favor, and its medical properties have been the subject of a wide variety of scientific studies in recent years.

Many of the ancient beliefs that garlic could cure the common cold, high blood pressure, high fevers, rheumatism, tuberculosis, worms, respiratory ailments, toothaches, freckles, snakebites, whooping cough, and baldness have some basis in fact. Research indicates that the active ingredient responsible for garlic’s strong smell—allicin—may not only lower blood cholesterol levels, but also can be used as an anti-coagulant to prevent blood clots and strokes.

Additionally, allicin may help prevent colon, prostate, and stomach cancer, and the studies support the belief that garlic is a natural antimicrobial drug. Its ability to kill food-borne bacteria may explain why it gained such popularity in countries with warm climates. Its antiseptic qualities are what helped the British heal wounds suffered in trench warfare of World War I.

To get the most out of garlic’s medicinal value, let the peeled cloves sit in the open air for about ten minutes before cooking. Exposing the cloves to oxygen reputedly causes a chemical reaction that produces anticarcinogens, which cannot be destroyed by heat.

But oh! that smell; you say you love garlic, but don’t want to offend others with bad breath? Never fear! Rather than surround yourself with only friends and family who share your love of the malodorous little herb, or simply pretend you don’t smell like a pizza factory, munch on a few sprigs of parsley or a clove of cinnamon—these counteract the sulfur molecules of the allicin causing the aroma.

To remove the smell from your hands after peeling or chopping fresh garlic, wash then rub your clean hands on a chrome faucet or stainless steel spoon. This actually works: the chemical reaction eliminates the odor almost instantaneously. However, you may have to repeat the process if some time has passed between washing up and your handling of the cloves.

OK; you understand the health benefits, and the smell is manageable, but what other foods besides pesto and pizza use garlic? Ah, you’d be surprised...

Since the 1950s, garlic has become a passion for many of the world’s leading chefs, and a staple in American pantries. From soup to sorbet, garlic appears in appetizers, salads, breads, vegetable dishes, main courses, and yes, many desserts. A roasted head of elephant garlic may even *be* the main course.

When purchasing garlic, make sure the heads are firm. If you see a powdery patch under the skin, don’t buy because it is an indication of mold that will spoil the flesh.

Do not refrigerate or freeze unpeeled garlic—store in an open container away from other foods. Stored properly, garlic can remain fresh for up to three months.

The green sprouts that appear at the center of each clove as the garlic ages can be bitter, so discard before using the clove in a recipe. Or you may plant the cloves and let them sprout—after they grow to about six inches, you can use the sprouts like chives.

You may also purchase garlic as peeled whole cloves or minced, stored in either olive or vegetable oil. Garlic in oil must be refrigerated to avoid the

potential for botulism poisoning. At room temperature, the bacteria that cause botulism thrives.

If you like gardening, garlic is easy to grow. Most gardeners plant the cloves in the fall since, like a tulip, garlic is a bulb. But in the southern regions where February and March planting is common, spring planting is possible. You can try using the garlic you get from the grocery store, or buy a head from the nursery—or get the kids involved in an experiment and try both.

Break the heads into individual cloves and plant these with the pointed end facing up, spacing them about 3 to 4 inches apart. Keep the soil loose and moist. Fertilize two or three times during the growing season. Watch for the appearance of white, blotchy areas on the leaves. If you see such spots, thripes may be feasting on the plants. Blast them with cold water and keep the garden free of weeds. To keep the onion maggot at bay, scatter wood ashes or rock phosphate around the base of the plants.

When most of the leaves are brown and dry, it's time to pull up the bulbs and let them dry in the sun for about 10-14 days. To help prevent rot, hang them in a cool, airy spot. After curing, trim the tops and roots and remove the dried outer layers of skin. Then, feast on the fruits of your labor with your favorite garlic recipes.

Now for some more garlic trivia—what two American cities are named after garlic?

While Gilroy, in California, is the birthplace of the American garlic festival (begun in 1979), Chicago is allegedly named for this most fragrant pearl of root plants. When French explorers visited the region in 1687 and asked the local Native Americans what their name for the area—*Chicagoua*—meant, they were told that it was the name for the odorous plant that grew wild in the woods. The Native Americans used the plant for cooking and as a poultice for wounds. Most likely, they were referring to wild garlic, although some claim it was actually onions or leeks.

In time, the Native American name evolved into Chicago. Now, although there are some doubts about the origins of the name for the Windy City, there is one place—Ajo, Arizona, quite literally “Garlic, USA.” *Ajo* is the Spanish word for garlic.

I think I'll grab me some sprigs of parsley and dig in—shall I try *Forty-Clove Chicken*, or do I start with *Garlic Shrimp Quesadillas*? Hmm...maybe I'll just skip the appetizer and the main course and munch on some *Tipsy Chocolate Garlic*. Yum.