

Geography in the News™

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GARLIC FOR LIFE

Garlic is one of the world's most beloved and despised seasonings. Aficionados of Italian foods welcome the bold aromas of garlic rising above their favorite dishes. For non-garlic lovers, however, garlic breath is a romance killer.

Roman soldiers ate garlic for courage. Egyptian slaves ate it to increase their strength. The sacred writings of Christians, Muslims and Hindus mention the lowly garlic, according to Phyllis D. Light's "Garlic for the Ages" (*Energy Times*, Feb. 2004). Medieval Europeans thought it had aphrodisiac effects and would keep vampires at bay, along with having other magical qualities.

The lowly garlic has actual medicinal benefits, some dating back more than 7,000 years. It has been used as a digestive stimulant, diuretic and antispasmodic. Recent research has demonstrated that it can help lower cholesterol, thin blood and reduce heart disease. Garlic contains antioxi-

dant properties and may reduce blood clots.

Garlic is a common name given to a variety of heavily scented members of the lily family and is related to the common onion. The garlic bulb can be broken into several bulblets, called cloves, which are the most used parts of the plant. Used as a flavoring in cooking, garlic cloves can be used whole, crushed, powdered, or as an extract, imparting a pungent aroma to seasoned foods.

The wild garlic plant likely originated in Central Asia, according to Philipp W. Simon (USDA, Univ. of Wisconsin). As one of the oldest known horticultural crops, it still grows wild in the Central Asian countries of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Although there are other species of wild garlic, such as the wild native found in North American yards, most of these species have no commercial value.

As with onions, garlic plants enjoy a wide range of climate, although cool, moist growing seasons are most productive. Garlic must be propagated asexually; that is, its cloves are used to grow new bulbs. In the fall, farmers must plant the cloves by hand-always with the base side down-in order to assure growth by early spring.

Commercial garlic farms are found all over the temperate world today, but most garlic outside of the United States is grown in family gar-

dens. California is the largest commercial producer of garlic in the United States, with a 1996 value of \$145 million on 5 million acres. Production is increasing annually by more than 10 percent as garlic increases in popularity. Other western states also produce some commercial garlic, including Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Colorado and New Mexico, but none approach California's production totals.

Nowhere is garlic production more concentrated than in Southern California's Santa Clara County. In fact, Gilroy, Calif., is known as the Garlic Capital of the World. This agricultural center of 50,000 people hosts thousands of guests annually at its Gilroy Garlic Festival in late July. Garlic bread is a favorite among the guests, but garlic ice cream is available for those looking for a special garlic supplement.

Just riding along Highway 101 south of Santa Clara in July provides a distinct aroma from fields of growing garlic-almost "heaven" for those who can't live without garlic.

And that is Geography in the News™. June 4, 2004. #731.

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http://www.hort.wisc.edu/usdavcru/simon/garlic_origins.html

Garlic: A Pungent Aroma

