

Garlic Chives, *Allium tuberosum*



Allium tuberosum is a late-season bloomer from the onion family. Native to southeastern Asia, it is known by several common names including garlic chives, Chinese chives or Chinese leek. It is sometimes confused with a very similar species, *A. ramosum* or fragrant-flowered garlic, but that plant blooms earlier in the year and has a slightly different leaf structure. Although *A. tuberosum* is typically used as an ornamental in North America, it is edible and has been used in Chinese herbal medicine for a variety of ailments.

This herbaceous perennial, hardy in zones 3-9, forms slowly expanding clumps of gray-green foliage 10-20" tall. Each elongate, poorly developed bulb is attached individually to a stout rhizome similar to that of an iris, and produces 4-9 leaves. The narrow, flattened, strap- or grass-like leaves arch downward at the tips, forming a fountain of green that remains tidy and attractive throughout the growing season. When bruised or crushed the leaves (and other plant parts) have a

Garlic chives bloom in the fall.

strong onion or garlic scent. In warmer climates the plants are evergreen, but in colder climates they die back to the ground over the winter. Just like chives, cutting the leaves back encourages new growth. Leaves can be harvested to eat anytime they are green.



The grass-like foliage of garlic chives (L). Each narrow leaf is flattened to be roughly triangular in cross-section (C), with a rounded tip (R).

In late summer to early fall, flowers open on sturdy, two to three foot-tall stalks well above the foliage. Each 2-3" wide loose umbel contains many small, white, star-shaped flowers with brown-striped tepals. The flowers are attractive to butterflies, bees and other pollinators, with a sweet scent. They are good for cutting and the seed heads for dried arrangements.



Flowers of *Allium tuberosum* emerge from papery buds (L) to open in loose umbels of star-shaped, white flowers (R).

Eventually the flowers are followed by dark, papery capsules filled with hard, triangular-shaped black seeds. Because it self seeds very readily and produces seed prolifically (like many ornamental onions), it is best to cut off the flower stalks as soon as they have finished blooming to prevent rampant spread. Even though it can spread aggressively by seed, the seedlings are relatively easy to remove when young (although they can be quite numerous, so weeding may take a lot of time). This plant can be invasive under some conditions, so should be planted with care.



Garlic chives coming up in spring.

Grow garlic chives in full sun in well-drained soil. It can easily be started from seed, or from divisions. Once established, *A. tuberosum* is very heat, cold and drought tolerant. Clumps should be lifted and divided about every 3 years to maintain vigor and blooming.



Garlic chives grow best in full sun.

The flavor of the leaves of *A. tuberosum* is subtle, like very mild garlic, while the narrow bulbs are strong and sharp when eaten raw. The leaves are used similarly to the way chives or green onions are used, and are especially useful to add mild garlic flavor in uncooked dishes where raw garlic would be too overpowering. They can be added to salads, egg dishes, soups, or stews, but should be added at the end of cooking in hot dishes as too much heat destroys the mild flavor. It is used in stir fries and other dishes in several oriental cuisines, especially Korean. The flowers are also edible, so can be used as a garnish or added to salads.

Garlic chives combine well with many perennials and annuals. The grayish leaves soften bright oranges and set off pink or rose-colored flowers. They are a nice contrast to purple foliage, such as dark-leaved sedums or heucheras. Plants can be used as low-maintenance edging or in containers to provide vertical interest when in flower. Potted plants can be brought inside over the winter for a supply of leaves for cooking.



The poorly developed bulbs.

– Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin - Madison

Additional Information:

- *Allium tuberosum* — on the Missouri Botanic Garden's Kemper Center for Home Gardening website at www.mobot.org/gardeninghelp/plantfinder/plant.asp?code=U770
- *Allium tuberosum* — on Floridata at www.floridata.com/ref/a/alli_tub.cfm