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with the Littleton Garden Club

Allium: From the frying pan to the flower vase

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In late Spring, you could see those large red, pink, white, or purple balls on a 3-foot-high single stalk in neighbors' yards. Those are Alliums. The name 'Allium' comes from the Latin word for garlic and is the title for a Genus of plants which includes around 900 varieties. Garlic, onions, shallots, leeks, and chives are all Alliums. Gardeners have cultivated these plants for use in cooking since ancient times. They have a strong pungent smell and are valued for the flavor they contribute to food. The strength of the flavor comes from the sulfate found in the soil in which they are grown.

In my home gardens, we grow many different Alliums. By the door to our kitchen, we planted herbs including traditional chives with their lovely lavender flowers.

Also, garlic chives with white flowers and a flat green stem. Garlic chives add a mild garlic flavor to spring baby potatoes.

In the vegetable garden, we have bunching onions. 'Nabechan' (white) and 'Deep Purple' (red) are good choices. We use them like scallions or spring onions. The nice advantage is that they can winter over. Our standard onions include 'Walla Walla' (white and sweet), 'Cabernet' and 'Red Carpet' (red), and 'Sierra' (yellow). Any of these can be picked as spring onions, and most seed companies will have sets available that stagger your harvesting time. There are several special members of the onion family. Shallots is one I am growing for the first time this year. Also, Chinese Onions which I know nothing about.

The last two edible Alliums are garlic and

leeks. Both of these grow well in New Hampshire. Leeks take three months to mature. We buy 'King Richard' sets to speed it up. Sets go in the ground in early spring to harvest in late summer and fall. The flavor of leeks in Vichyssoise soup or roasted leeks is mild and very pleasant.

Our favorite savory ingredient is garlic. We have tried between 4 and 10 varieties, settling on three. They are 'Music,' 'German,' and 'Susanville.' We save some bulbs each year and plant the cloves in early October. The planting should be done after the soil has been turned and loose to about a foot in the ground. Plant cloves at six inch intervals and four to six inches deep. Next June, sprouts will curl to become garlic scapes. If left, they flower and take energy from the cloves below. Harvest garlic at

the end of June or when leaves turn yellow. Let them dry for a month in a cool dry space such as up in open rafters of a garage or a dry basement. Remove leaves & brush off dirt. Don't wash. Store garlic in a labeled brown paper bag until needed in the kitchen or for planting next year.

Most Alliums are edible including the entire plant, yet only about the 12 mentioned above are sold in the grocery store or grown in the garden as crops.

Some Alliums are grown for their use and effect in the flower garden. They are very colorful and stand out, just not in the kitchen. This distinction is important as some Alliums are toxic and dangerous for humans, cats, and dogs to eat. Most of these "ornamentals" have been bred recently to define the edges or complement other plants in a flower bed. These cultivars can add that special visual structure to the late spring garden before the

berries mature. Some of the best-known and most successful in the cold Northeast are 'Ambassador', 'Globemaster', and 'Mont Blanc'. You may want to take a camera out in the garden or harvest for a vase.

Enjoy gardening, have fun, eat well, and chew a breath mint after a dinner of your favorite Allium!

For more information about the club and our meetings, please visit www.littletongardenclub.org.