



Getting to know the Society Garlic

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Above: Society Garlic's flowers are highly decorative.

The Society Garlic, *Tulbaghia violacea*, is a native of South Africa where it grows in rocky grasslands of the Transvaal, Natal, & eastern Cape of Good Hope. A member of the onion family, *Alliaceae*, the Society Garlic may sometimes be classified under the Amaryllis family, *Amaryllidaceae*. It is an attractive flowering, heat-tolerant perennial that can be easily confused with the common Chinese Chives (*Allium tuberosum*) because of the similarities these two plants have with regards to their physical appearance and the odour they emit.

Similar to Chinese Chives, the narrow, grayish green, strap-like leaves of the Society Garlic also rise from a small bulb located below the ground. Both plants are clump-forming and spread through the advancement of an underground stem. With time, a non-invasive turf of grassy foliage can be obtained. There is a Society Garlic cultivar that has albomarginated foliage where the leaf margins are edged white. Known as 'Silver Lace', this cultivar is, unfortunately, not available for sale in local nurseries in Singapore.



Above: Don't confuse the two plants! The plant on the left is Chinese Chives while the one on the right is Society Garlic.

When lightly brushed against or bruised, the leaves of the Society Garlic emit a characteristic garlic-like odour which one will either like it or dislike it. In close proximity, the wind can also bring the Society Garlic's odour to one's nose without one disturbing the foliage. Hence, for those who dislike it, walking next to a border consisting of Society Garlic can be quite an unpleasant experience. Could this be a reason why it is not commonly grown in Singapore's streetscape or home garden?

The only distinguishing feature between the Chinese Chives and Society Garlic is through their flowers. The Chinese Chives bears flowers are that are white in colour while the flowers of the Society Garlic are pinkish violet. The Society Garlic's flowers are tubular in appearance and are also much larger but produced in a smaller number compared to the Chinese Chives. The Society's Garlic's flowers are borne on a loose umbel that is displayed conspicuously at the end of a tall, upright flower stalk and they are hard to miss. In some ways, a Society Garlic plant in flower looks like a miniaturised version of a flowering *Agapanthus*, a temperate flowering bulb. The flowers of the Society Garlic attract insect pollinators during the day and last well as a cut flower in a glass of water. They are also mildly fragrant at night but it can be easily masked by the stronger, garlic-like smell that the leaves give off.



Left: Chinese Chives' flowers are white and borne on a more crowded umbel.



Right: Society Garlic's flowers are violet and borne on a loose crowded umbel.

A plant for the culinary herb garden, the Society Garlic's flowers and leaves are said to be edible. The leaves and flowers, unexpectedly, have very little flavour. The name "Society Garlic" comes from an ancient belief that this garlic does not cause bad breath when consumed. However, there is some controversy as to whether the Society Garlic is really suitable for consumption. Some sources have reported that it may cause vomiting and should be grown only for ornamental purposes. The Society Garlic makes a good companion plant for growing in the vegetable garden, as it may be able to repel certain undesirable bugs, such as aphids, due to the garlic odour it emits.

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The Society Garlic plant attains a height of slightly less than 30 cm and this makes it a suitable candidate for use as a foreground or border plant. It is best used for mass plantings in an outdoor garden, which will make it more visible in the landscape. Due to its garlic odour that some people detest, a Society Garlic patch can be located well away from human traffic and plants and their flowers can be appreciated from a short distance.

Requiring sunshine to grow well and flower, the Society Garlic should not be grown in a location where its leaves will burn. When it happens, the leaf tips turn brown and dry up, which makes the plant look sad. In such a case, trim off all burnt leaves, relocate the clump elsewhere that sunlight is less intense and allow time for the plant to regenerate. In the lowland tropics, grow this plant under semi-shade or in a spot where it can only receive half a day's worth of direct sunshine. With such light requirements, the Society Garlic can be grown in a container in a highrise apartment garden on a sunny window ledge.

A well-drained, aerated growing medium is preferred by the Society Garlic plant. When planted in the ground outdoors, try growing it elevated, either on a mound of soil or on a slope, so that excess water can drain away and not stay with the roots for too long. Prolonged exposure to waterlogged conditions can cause this plant to rot.

In general, the Society Garlic is a maintenance- and fuss-free plant to grow. It is rather drought-resistant and has been recommended as a candidate to consider for a xeriscaped garden. A drought-resistant plant does not mean that it need not be watered. The Society Garlic would do better if it is well-watered and allowed to dry out slightly before the next watering.



Above: Periodically cut away yellowing leaves and spent flower stalks to keep the plant looking neat and tidy.

To have a tidy and attractive colony of Society Garlic, spent flower stalks should be cut away after flowering. The same applies for dead leaves or leaves with brown tips. Plants can be sufficiently fed with a balanced fertilizer, either soluble or slow-release, at the recommended dosage and frequency as given on the label by the manufacturer.

The Society Garlic is most easily propagated via the division of large clumps of plants. Division of large clumps can help to rejuvenate the plant. Seeds are not available commercially but they can be collected from mature seed heads. This latter method is a slower way of starting new plants. The plant also produces baby plants on spent flower stalks and these can be detached and potted up individually.



Above: The society garlic can be propagated via division of a crowded clump and divisions can then be potted up separately.

Seldom a victim of pests and diseases, the Society Garlic may occasionally be bothered by slugs and snails that eat away the foliage as well as young growth and that happens usually during the night or wet weather. As mentioned before, plants may suffer from crown rot if grown in a poor-draining medium.

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