

Growing Garlic

If you have ever tasted home grown or local farm grown garlic you know it is far superior in flavor to what you can buy in the grocery store. Garlic is an easy crop to grow and planting it in October/early November will ensure you a bountiful harvest next July - which will keep you in home grown garlic for the entire year. Get your soil ready and give it a try.

There are basically two types of garlic we use for culinary purposes, Hardneck and Softneck. Both grow well in New England but there are differences.

Hardneck: The majority of the garlic grown in the northeast is of the hardneck type, which is so noted for its stiff “neck” or stalk and large cloves. Hardneck produces a scape, which is essentially a flower stock - though usually the flowers abort and produce “bulbils” which are tiny aerial cloves. These can be saved and planted but will take two years to produce a bulb. If you want to experiment and have a cheap source of increasing your seed stock give the bulbils a try. Many gardeners cut the scapes off as they develop and use them in stir fries, and some believe that this results in more energy going into the bulb - though research on this is inconclusive. The number of cloves produced from a hardneck bulb are usually few in number (4-8 per bulb), but huge in size. If a large clove is what you are after you definitely want to grow hardneck varieties. Hardneck varieties don’t store quite as long as softneck which is why many gardeners plant both types. Good hardneck variety choices for the northeast include ‘German Extra Hardy’ (a local favorite), ‘Russian Red’, ‘Killarney Red’ and ‘Montana Giant’.

Softneck: Like the name implies softneck varieties of garlic have a more pliable stalk, produce smaller but numerous cloves per bulb (12-20), do not produce a scape, can be braided for storage, and store better than the hardneck type. Virtually all of the garlic purchased in grocery stores is of the softneck type. However it is not recommended to use grocery store bought bulbs for planting as the varieties come from California and China and are not adapted to our growing conditions. Also grocery store garlic may be treated with a sprout inhibitor to lengthen storage life. Good softneck varieties for the northeast include ‘New York White’ (the local favorite), ‘Artichoke’ and ‘Silverskin’.

Soil Preparation: Garlic is best grown in a well drained soil as it won’t tolerate wet feet, and prefers soils high in organic matter. A raised bed would be an ideal location for growing garlic. Be sure and amend the soil with well rotted manure or, preferably a quality compost. If possible spread ½ to 1 inch of compost over the entire planting area and work it into the first few inches of soil. As with most garden crops, garlic grows best when the soil pH is between 6 and 7. If you are not sure what your soil pH is, go to www.umass.edu/soiltest for soil testing info. There is still time to get a soil test done and work in the proper amount of lime if needed as you prepare the planting bed. If you amend the soil with manure or compost before planting no further fertilizer is needed until spring.

Cultural Practices:

- Garlic should be planted between October 1 and November 15 to give the clove a chance to develop some roots before it goes dormant for the winter.
- Separate cloves from the bulb and plant root side down (pointed side up) about 2-4 inches deep, 6-8 inches apart in the row and 12-18 inches between rows. A bulb planter used for tulips and daffodils is an excellent tool to get a number of cloves planted quickly.
- In mid to late November, when the ground begins to freeze, mulch the planting bed with 6-12 inches of straw. This step insures it won't heave with the freezing and thawing of winter and will survive the cold temperatures. Pine needles are also a good source of mulch.
- In early spring as the ground thaws, look for the green tips beginning to emerge underneath the straw. When they emerge, pull the straw back but leave it in place between the rows, where it will keep the weeds down and the water in.
- Fertilize in spring with a complete fertilizer such as 10-10-10 (3 lb per 100 sq. feet), or an organic complete fertilizer at roughly twice the rate, as usually they contain roughly half the nitrogen as chemical fertilizers.
- As half of the leaves begin to die-back in July harvest the garlic by gently pulling on the stalk while prying beneath the bulb with a trowel. The clove you planted last fall will have magically turned into a multi-cloved bulb. Gently shake off the dirt but do not wash before storage. Don't wait until all the leaves have died-back or your bulbs will not store well.
- Cure the garlic by hanging in a warm, dry, well ventilated place such as a barn or attic. I have cured mine by laying them on a sheet of cardboard in my garage. Let them cure for two weeks.
- For storage give them another shake after two weeks of curing to remove more soil, cut off the stalks of hardneck varieties and store them in a cool dry place. For softneck you can leave the stalks attached if you wish to braid and hang them for ease of use and aesthetics in the kitchen - but you may also cut off the stalks and store them with the hardneck varieties.
- Save some of your biggest bulbs for planting next fall.

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