

Growing Garlic: Getting Started

October is the month to plant this vegetable. Here are a few Q and A to get you started.

Can I grow garlic?

If you can grow onions in your garden, you can grow garlic. Garlic is a member of the onion family, and as such, its cultural requirements are similar to those of onion. To grow well, garlic requires a minimum of 6 to 8 hours of direct sun and loose, deep, fertile soil with good drainage and a pH of 6.5 to 7. A soil test will indicate what soil amendments are needed prior to planting your garlic crop. Incorporate plenty of organic matter into the area: grow a summer green manure crop and till it under or work in well-aged compost. Follow soil test recommendations for applying limestone if the pH is too low. Add a balanced fertilizer like 10-10-10 at a rate of 3 pounds per 100 square feet or according to soil test guidelines.

What do I plant?

The number of garlic cultivars is mind-boggling. Which you plant will be a matter of

- personal preference (do you like your garlic hot and spicy or more mild-mannered?)
- how quickly you use garlic (there are two main types of garlic, softneck and hardneck: softneck types will last much longer in storage)
- trial and error (which cultivars perform best in your garden?)

I currently grow almost 30 cultivars of garlic, and every year I add a few more. I do have favorites: those that perform reliably and provide the distinct flavor I desire. (I'm less concerned with storage capability, since I tend to use large amounts of fresh garlic and dry the rest before it becomes unusable.) Some of my preferred cultivars are Polish Jenn and Music, hardneck types that form large, moderately spicy cloves and are easy to peel; Spanish Roja, Hnat, and French Red, hardneck types with a serious bite but don't keep long in storage; and Inchelium Red, a softneck type that's mild enough to eat raw.

Where do I get garlic to plant?

Regional garlic festivals are an excellent way to obtain initial "seed" garlic, that is, the large bulbs that you'll split apart to plant. Vendors at these festivals supply the latest and greatest varieties as well as commonly grown standards. Local nurseries and farm supply stores are other good sources for starter garlic. Garlic is available through mail order catalogs, but I prefer to hand-pick only the best for my initial bulbs. Once your garlic plantings get going, you'll be able to save bulbs from each year's harvest to plant for the next season.

When and how do I plant?

It is possible to get a decent garlic crop by planting in early spring, but fall planting after a hard frost will give garlic plants a head start on spring growth. The large bulbs of garlic you harvest in August are a result of vigorous leaf growth during short, cool spring days. Large bulbs are also a product of planting large cloves, so select the largest, healthiest looking bulbs to start your garlic plot. Keep bulbs whole until planting time; separating cloves too far in advance of planting decreases yields.

Plant individual cloves 1 inch below the soil surface with pointed side up, 3 to 5 inches apart within a row. Plant garlic in double rows to save space, leaving 6 to 8 inches between rows.

Allow 18 to 30 inches between each bed of double rows. After the ground freezes, cover the beds with 3 to 4 inches of straw mulch to reduce temperature fluctuations and prevent frost heaving of cloves.

Now what?

That's it for now! Use the winter months to read up on care of your garlic plants during the growing season. They'll require plenty of water and nitrogen during leaf development, and the straw mulch you applied after planting will be rearranged around plants to help keep the soil moist, cool, and weed free. You'll be cutting the young scapes in June to boost bulb size at harvest. When one third of the leaves are yellowing or brown, you'll be lifting the bulbs and curing them in a dry, airy, warm spot for two weeks before storing. At this time next year, you'll be relishing the zesty taste of your own fresh garlic and choosing the best of your harvest to start the process again!

UMass Extension Agriculture and Landscape Program 4/12

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