

How To: Grow Garlic

When To Grow: Garlic is planted in the autumn, survives bitterly cold winters as an underground plant (or grows frost-hardy leaves where winters are mild to moderate), resumes rapid growth when the weather warms in spring, and bulbs in summer. In the North, plant 4-6 weeks before the ground freezes. This gives the plant time to make good root development but not enough time to make leaf growth. Where winters are milder, garlic is planted from October through January. Where winters are so severe or snow cover so unreliable that garlic freezes out, softneck varieties are planted in spring.

Soil Preparation: Garlic can survive in poor soil so long as it does not become waterlogged. But to make nice bulbs, garlic needs fertile soil with lots of organic matter. Bulbs must be dug cleanly, so the soil must remain uncompacted through the long growing season. Growers with clayey soils should add a lot of compost before planting; those blessed with lighter soils having naturally loose texture need add only small amounts of organic matter, or grow and till in green manures prior to planting.

How To Plant: Break the bulb into individual cloves. There will be a mixture of large and small cloves. Small cloves usually grow small bulbs, so plant only the larger ones. Use the small cloves in your kitchen. We work hard to provide you with the largest possible bulbs for planting. Where winter is mild plant cloves one inch deep, root side down; where winter is severe, put them inches deep and mulch lightly, immediately after planting. In spring, the garlic will have no trouble pushing through an inch of mulch. Minimum spacing on raised beds is 4 x 8 inches. To grow the largest bulbs, try spacing your plants 6 x 12 inches.

Growing: Most of the work comes after garlic has overwintered. It must be kept well weeded. Take care not to damage the shallow roots when cultivating. Garlic needs to be moderately fertilized as soon as it begins growing in spring. Organic gardeners can side dress a little chicken manure or sprinkle one half to gallon of seedmeal (cottonseed, canola, linseed, soymeal) alongside each 50 row feet. The plants also respond very well to foliar fertilizer, sprayed every ten days to two weeks, but remember: nitrogen is garlic's major requirement. While the plant is rapidly growing new leaves, keep the soil moist as you would for any other leafy green like lettuce or spinach. When summer arrives, garlic stops making new leaves and starts forming bulbs. Once bulbing begins fertilizing is useless, maybe even harmful to getting the best quality bulbs.

Seed Stalks: "Hardneck" varieties put up a tall, woody flowering stalk that usually grows bulblets at the top. But if the plant is allowed to put its energy into these "seeds", the bulb forming below ground will end up smaller. So we cut seed stalks off as soon as the flower head has reached 8-9 inches tall.

Harvest: Gauging the right time to harvest is very important. Dug too soon, the skins won't have formed around each clove. Hardneck bulbs, if dug too late, may have begun to spread apart in the soil. Each year the timing is a little different so rather than watch the calendar, observe the plants. As the bulbs mature the leaves brown off. When there are still five or six green leaves remaining on the plant, dig and examine a plant every few days to check the bulb. (Note: immature bulbs that haven't fully developed skins around their cloves can be chopped up like onions and make delicious additions to cooking.) In very good garlic ground (very fluffy soil) the plants might be pulled by hand, but it is usually better to loosen the soil first with a spading fork. Immediately brush off the soil from around the roots, very gently. Drying is the essential part of curing the bulbs so do not wash them in water. Immediately move the newly dug garlic out of direct sunlight.

Curing: Plants can be tied by their leaves or stalks in loose bundles of 8-12 plants and hung under cover. Or, spread the plants in single layers on screens, drying racks, or slatted shelves. Garlic stores longer if it is cured with its stalk or leaves attached. Good air circulation is absolutely essential. The plants should cure from three weeks to two months, depending on the humidity and amount of air circulation. Some growers use a fan in the curing shed. After curing, you may trim the roots. If the garlic is to be kept in sacks, cut the stalks off ½ inch above the bulb and gently clean the bulbs with a soft bristle brush, taking care not to strip off the papery skin.

Storing: Hang garlic in netted sacks, so there is air circulation on all sides. Or, hang the dried bunches, or make and hang braids of the softneck types. Perfect storage conditions are 45-55 deg F at 50% RH. Keeping garlic below 40 deg F actually makes garlic sprout.

