

It's time to plant Garlic

by Claudia Steen

There are times when I want to kick myself for not planting garlic. Grocery store garlic is not expensive but many times I have torn apart a bulb to only find most cloves dried out and absent of “garlicky goodness”. For larger bulbs, garlic should be planted now to enjoy next summer.

Garlic (*Allium sativum*) has been grown for thousands of years for its culinary and medicinal properties.

Garlic comes in two forms: Hardneck garlic is the hardiest form producing cloves around a woody stem that send up a curly flower stalks. This is the most cold hardy of the garlics with a milder flavor. Softneck garlic forms cloves around a soft neck or stem, which braids easily. Softneck garlic is most commonly found in supermarkets due to a longer storage life. Another favorite is Elephant garlic that produces larger cloves with a mild taste.

Garlic requires full sun (at least six hours per day). It is best started by direct seed garlic that can be purchased through garden centers, catalogs, and online websites. There are many publications that encourage planting garlic bulbs purchased at the grocery store but due to the likelihood of diseases being present on the bulb it is not encouraged by more reliable sources.

Plant garlic in early to mid-fall. Pick the largest bulbs you can find – the size of the cloves you plant will determine whether you get big or small heads when you harvest. Soil should be loose with compost worked in to support root growth. Mulch can be used to protect plants from cold damage during the winter and to prevent weeds. Spread 3-4 inches of mulch over the planting area. Large cloves that are clean, injury-free, and dry should be planted so the tops are 2 inches below the soil line. Break open the bulbs and plant the cloves flat side down and pointed-side up. Plant 4 to 6 inches apart in rows that are spaced 12-14 inches apart. Do not worry if sprouts come up prior to cold weather as they will go dormant.

Planting areas should be kept free of weeds and plant debris. Rotation of plantings on a three-year basis will reduce the probability of diseases and pests. Do not plant onions in the same area as garlic as they are susceptible to many of the same diseases and pests.



When spring growth begins, water to keep the soil slightly moist and fertilize with a high nitrogen fertilizer applied every two weeks until bulbs start to form. Cut off any curly flowering stems (or scapes) at the top leaf to redirect energy to the bulb. If you harvest your scapes young and tender, you can chop them into salads or use them as a topping, like scallions.



Stop watering when the tops of the plants begin to fall over and dry up, about 2-4 weeks before harvest, usually late June to mid-July. Many gardeners wait to harvest until about half the leafy growth has turned brown – usually August or September.

Garlic is more susceptible to diseases such as rust, mold, and mildew than to pests.

Do not damage bulbs during harvest, as this will cause deterioration during storage. Remove any soil from the bulb and roots gently. Place the garlic with tops intact in a dry, cool, well-ventilated place to cure. Remove stems and store in mesh bags or braid and hang in bunches. After 3-4 weeks the garlic will be cured and will keep for up to 6 months if stored at lower than 40 degrees Fahrenheit.

Garlic can be used raw and crushed in dressings, salsa and butters, etc. Whole bulbs or individual cloves can be roasted to serve with roast meat or can be fried to use as the base for sauces, casseroles, and soups. Another trick is to put a few peeled cloves in a jar with oil, such as olive oil, grapeseed oil, etc., and place in the refrigerator. This will allow you to use the garlic flavored oils in cooking. And remember, it is always important to enjoy the “fruits of your labor” – this time in culinary delights.