

GROWING GARLIC

Photo credit: Jennie Cramer



To grow to a good size, garlic bulbs need space for their roots to grow, high levels of nitrogen, and consistent moisture levels. Order your bulbs online, pick them up from a local nursery, or get them at the Farmers' Market. There are softneck and hardneck varieties, but hardneck is recommended for colder climates like ours.

Garlic is planted in fall and not harvested until the following summer, so clear a space in your bed where there will be space and full sun for many months. Remove all weeds and previously grown crops and mix in some composted manure or compost. Adding another nitrogen source (alfalfa meal, fish meal, soybean meal) helps root development this fall and growth next spring.

Plant garlic in your prepared bed about 3-4 weeks before the ground freezes (early October or around the time of our first fall frost). Break the bulb into cloves and plant them pointy side up about 3" deep and 6-10" apart. The roots spread 3-4" around the bulb, so the more room you can give each clove, the larger your bulb will be in summer. Space the rows 12" apart.

Mulch with 4-6" of hay, straw, or leaves to protect the cloves. Monitor moisture levels in fall and water if needed.

Next spring, move the mulch around to loosen any spears that emerge but leave the mulch on to keep moisture levels consistent and prevent weeds.

Keep garlic fed and watered regularly for proper bulb formation. Water weekly as needed. Side dress with nitrogen-rich fertilizers or feed with 1 Tablespoon fish emulsion mixed in 1 gallon of water every 2 weeks until the scapes appear.

Cut off the scapes (flower stalks) before they uncurl as they take energy away from bulb formation. The scapes taste like mild garlic and can be used in cooking, salads, or making pesto – just like you would use garlic. They can also be tossed in the compost pile if you don't want to eat them. Stop feeding at this time but continue to monitor moisture levels.

Around the end of July-beginning of August, about a month after your scapes appeared, leaves will begin to yellow. They yellow from the bottom up. Stop watering when several bottom leaves are yellow, but top leaves are still green. Each green leaf represents a layer of the papery wrapper that will rot as each upper leaf dies, so you don't want to lose too many.

Allow the soil to dry about a week before you harvest. To harvest, loosen the soil with a spading fork, gently pull up the heads and shake off the soil. Enjoy fresh or dry the entire plant in a well-ventilated area for 3-5 weeks. When cured, brush off any remaining soil, trim the roots & tops to within 1" of the bulb, and store in a cool, dry, dark place. Some varieties will last in storage for up to a year.

*Master Gardener Shellie Wise
Warren County*