

Growing in the Garden Now - Garlic

Before wet winter weather sets in and holiday schedules get hectic, take the time to plant garlic for next summer's harvest. The month of November is prime garlic planting time, and you only need a few feet of garden space to grow it in.



Your chances of getting a bountiful garlic crop will improve if you plant in autumn and start with healthy stock. Pink rot, downy mildew and nematodes can plague garlic growers, so ask for certified disease-free bulb stock at the nursery.

You don't need a very large plot of ground in which to plant your garlic crop, but the site you select should provide full sun all winter. Garlic does best in rich loam, so avoid areas with dense clay soil or lots of rocks. If your existing soil is poor, add some compost or well-rotted manure to get your bulb crop off on the right foot. As you're digging in the amendments, toss in some bone meal or another fertilizer that provides phosphorus. If you are a gardener who has regularly added compost to your soil throughout previous seasons (good for you!), those prior "soil feedings" will likely provide all the nutrients your crop needs.

Garlic is planted from the individual cloves you get when you break up a garlic bulb. Pull the bulb apart into separate cloves, leaving the papery skins attached. Do this immediately before planting, as "cracking" the bulbs makes the cloves more vulnerable to disease and drying out. Sort the cloves by size and choose the largest ones for planting, as large cloves will yield the largest bulbs at harvest. Plant them pointy side up, spaced about four inches apart and at a depth of about one inch. Although the smaller, skinny cloves that you find in the center of a bulb of garlic don't produce sizable bulbs, you can still plant them in another area of the garden. As the plants develop throughout winter and spring, use the green leaves as you would chives. Or, harvest whole young plants and substitute them for scallions in recipes.

Resist the temptation to go hog wild with watering before germination occurs. Instead, wait to water until you see green tips emerging from the soil, and maintain evenly moist soil for the duration of the growing season. Rains may provide for your crop's water needs for the better part of the winter months, but check the soil during dry spells to ensure that the garden bed doesn't dry out.

Weeding is essential, especially for young plants that can't compete for sunlight, nutrients and space. Pull weeds and mulch lightly to smother out interlopers. When your crop has a growth spurt in the winter, fertilize once with a balanced fertilizer or apply a generous side dressing of compost.

Look out for insects such as mites, thrips, snails and cutworms while your crop is growing. If any of your plants succumb to rot, remove and dispose of affected bulbs and residual plant material. Learning the right time to harvest garlic takes some time and a bit of trial and error. You'll know you're hitting the home stretch in the summer when you notice several plants with yellowing tips.

Cut back on irrigation at this point, giving the soil time to dry out. Dig a bulb to check for mature, separating cloves and several layers of dry leaves surrounding the bulb. If your test subject looks like a happy, mature, and well-adjusted garlic bulb, use a spading fork to carefully dig and lift the rest of the crop. Take care not to puncture or bruise any of your precious gems, as freshly dug bulbs are fragile and tender. Don't pull garlic plants out of the ground by the leaves, as this can tear the leaf stalk and damage the tip of the bulb. Shake off as much dirt as you can. Cure your bulbs by leaving them on the soil surface in the garden for a couple of weeks, or by placing them in a dry, well-ventilated place. You can place them under the leaves of other plants to protect them from sunlight. After curing, brush off any remaining dirt and store them in a cool, dry place. You can also braid the stems together toward the end of the curing period, when the stems are still pliable enough to handle without breaking.

The University of California Statewide Integrated Pest Management Program (UC IPM) website provides cultural tips and a wealth of other information regarding garlic and other vegetable crops. Go to: <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/GARDEN/veggies.html>

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