

Cultivating garlic in your home garden



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Guest Column

Question: I would like to grow my own garlic. When is the best time to plant and what are your recommended techniques for growing a successful crop?

Answer: Fall is the best time to plant garlic for summer harvest. Unlike most vegetables we grow, garlic is planted in the autumn and not the spring. Garlic planted in the Spring will be smaller and generally lack bulb differentiation.

There are more than 100 varieties available for Northwest gardeners, each with their own distinctive taste and fire. Garlic (*Allium sativum*) is a member of the lily family. Garlic has been cultivated for thousands of years and is widely used for both its culinary and medicinal attributes. Garlic is native to central Asia. It was dispersed by nomadic people several thousand years ago. Garlic was documented as growing in Babylon as early as the eighth century B.C. and Chinese scholars mentioned garlic as early as 3000 B.C.

Garlic roots develop in the fall and winter, and by early spring they can support the rapid leaf growth that is necessary to form large bulbs. Garlic falls in two types. Non-flowering, soft-stemmed varieties, such as the ones in the supermarket, are easy to braid. Softneck varieties include Silver-skin, Inchelium Red, California Early and California Late.

The top setting hard stemmed varieties often are preferred by Northwest gardeners and gourmet cooks. These varieties are called top setting because they produce tall stalks (scapes) that loop at the top and burst open with tiny garlic bulb-lets at the end of the flowering stalk. Hard stem garlic bulbs include Asiatics (“Korean Red”), the rocamboles (“German Red” and “Spanish Roja”), “Music” and purple striped garlic (“Chesnok Red”).

Another type of garlic, elephant garlic, is actually a type of leek that produces large, mild tasting cloves that usually have fewer cloves per bulb than true garlies.

Plant the garlic in full sun. Garlic requires a well-drained soil with lots



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Garlic growing in a home garden. More than 100 varieties of garlic can survive in the Northwest, each with its own distinctive taste.

of organic matter. Garlic is a moderate to heavy feeder. In the fall, incorporate organic matter and a balanced fertilizer into the soil before planting. Lime the soil if you haven’t done so recently. Then in the spring, after the shoots emerge, side dress the garlic with nitrogen-rich fertilizer or a fertilizer containing only nitrogen.

Just before planting, break bulbs into individual cloves, keeping the bulb wrapper intact. If you tear a wrapper, eat that clove rather than planting it, because it will be prone to mold and rot in the ground. Select the largest cloves. The larger the clove, the bigger the bulb you will get in the summer. Plant your garlic cloves basal side down, 2 to 4 inches deep and 5 to 6 inches apart for optimal bulb development. Space elephant garlic cloves about 6 inches apart.

Mulch your garlic lightly with straw or leaves to improve soil structure and reduce weeds. Weed garlic well, as it can’t stand much competition. Garlic is rarely damaged by insects. Most years you

won’t need to water until May and June. Irrigate to a depth of two feet every 8 to 10 days. As mid-June approaches, taper off the watering to your garlic beds.

When your hard stem garlic puts up tall curling flowering scapes, cut these off. This practice will optimize the energy devoted to bulb formation. Use the scapes as you would a scallion or chive to add a fresh garlic taste to a meal. Crop rotation is very important to reduce disease and pest transmission. Avoid planting garlic where other onions, leeks or chives have grown in the past three years.

Harvest your garlic when more leaves are brown than green, usually in July. You can check to see if the garlic is ready by digging up a few bulbs. If you harvest too early, bulbs will be small and won’t store well. If left in the ground too long, hardneck bulbs will divide and spread apart, collecting soil and moisture, which may lead to rot.

Garlic may be pulled by hand, but it is usually best to use a tool and to

gently loosen the bulb before pulling. After harvesting garlic, hang the garlic in a well-ventilated area and allow the bulbs to dry for a few weeks before storing. Store your bulbs in a dark, dry and well-ventilated place. Do not store garlic in the refrigerator because the cool temperatures combined with moisture stimulate sprouting. Properly stored garlic should last until the next crop is harvested the following summer.

Garlic is grown from cloves, so it’s easy to save your own seed stock to re-plant for harvest next season.

The entire garlic plant is edible in all stages, so relish it at any time.

Do you have a gardening question? Please email, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-672-4461, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.