



Gardeners Helping Gardeners Succeed

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All About Garlic

from Irish Eyes website www.Irish-eyes.com

When to Plant:

Garlic survives bitterly cold winters underground (or frost-hardy leaves where winters are mild to moderate), grows rapidly 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.

Soil Preparation:

Garlic needs fertile soil with lots of organic matter so the soil remains uncompacted through the long growing season. Growers with clay soils should add a lot of compost before planting; those blessed with lighter soils having naturally loose texture need only small amounts of organic matter.

How to Plant:

Break the bulb into individual cloves. Small cloves usually grow small bulbs, so plant only the larger ones. Use the small cloves in your kitchen. Where winter is mild, plant cloves 1 inch deep, root side down; mulch lightly immediately after planting. In spring, garlic will have no trouble pushing through an inch of mulch. Minimum spacing on raised beds is 4-8 inches apart. To grow the largest bulbs, try spacing your plants 6-12 inches apart.

Growing:

After garlic has overwintered it must be kept well weeded. Do not 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 with a little chicken manure, seed meal, or strong compost. Garlic also likes high-nitrogen foliar fertilizer, sprayed every ten days to two weeks. Once bulbing begins, fertilizing is useless, maybe even harmful to getting the best quality bulbs. While the plant is rapidly growing, keep the soil as moist as you would for any other leafy green like lettuce or spinach.

Seed Stalks:

Hard-neck varieties put up a tall, woody flowering stalk that usually grows bulbets at the top. But if the plant is allowed to put its energy into these seeds, the bulb forming below the ground will end up smaller. So cut the 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. Hard-necked 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 5-6 green leaves remaining on the plant, dig and examine a plant every few days to check the bulb. (Immature bulbs that haven't 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, but do not wash them in water.

Immediately move the newly dug garlic out of the direct sunlight.

Curing:

Tie the plants by their leaves or stalks in loose bundles of 8-12 plants and hang them under cover. Or spread the plants in single layers on screens, drying racks, or slatted shelves. Garlic stores longer if its cured with its stalk or leaves attached. Good air circulation is absolutely essential. The plants should cure from 3 weeks to 2 months, depending on the humidity and amount of air circulation. After curing, you may trim the roots. If the garlic is to be kept in sacks, cut the stalks off 1/2 inch above the bulb and clean the bulbs with a soft brush, taking care not to strip off the papery skin.

Storing:

Hang bulbs in netted sacks, with good air circulation on all sides. Or, hang the dried bunches, or make hang braids of the soft neck types. Perfect storage conditions are 45-55 degrees at 50% humidity. Storage below 40 degrees actually makes the garlic sprout.