

Growing Garlic

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If you've grown garlic before, you know that the cloves for planting are found readily in the spring. What many do not know is that fall planted garlic produces larger cloves than spring-planted ones. Using this opportunity to plant now means it's not too late to reap the benefits of fall-planted garlic.

In selecting a site to grow garlic, choose one that gets 6 or more hours of direct uninterrupted sunlight daily and has a well-draining soil. In dense soils, garlic can rot, so amending the soil with compost first ensures a good crop. Garlic needs a nutrient-rich soil, so sandy soils will also benefit from the addition of compost.

In selecting a garlic variety, be aware there are hardneck and softneck types. Hardneck varieties store best over the winter months while the softneck types, favored for braiding together, have a short shelf life. Garlic from the grocery store has been treated to inhibit sprouting, so it isn't a good choice for planting. For the upper Midwest, choose hardneck varieties for their hardiness. Flavors range from mild to buttery to fiery. There are heirloom types, such as 'German Red' and 'Georgian Fire', as well as newer types, like 'Korean Red Hardneck' and 'Great Lakes'. Whatever variety you choose, growing your own garlic is easy and opens up a world of culinary possibilities.

Each garlic clove produces one head of garlic. The larger the clove planted, the larger the head of garlic produced. Separate the cloves from the bulb when you're ready to plant. The flat basal plate goes to the bottom of the hole, with the point facing skyward. Holes should be 3-4 inches deep and spaced about 6 inches apart. The first thing the clove does is put down roots to maintain moisture levels. In some instances, there may be green growth sprouting from cloves but this greenery should not be cut off, instead leaving it to nourish plants.

In the spring, growth in earnest begins, sometimes with the plant sending up a seed stalk. The seed stalk should be snapped off to encourage the plant to put energy into growing a larger head of garlic. The seed stalk is edible if harvested when tender, so don't be afraid to use it in dishes where a garlic flavor is desired. Garlic does best when plants receive about 1 inch of water per week. Bulbs are ready to harvest when the foliage dies back by about one-half. The biggest garlic bulb can be saved back for planting garlic cloves in the fall, starting the process again.

Now that you know fall-planted garlic is easy to grow and yields great results, the next thing to do is to get out those gardening gloves!