Growing Garlic: A Garden Staple Worth Growing

By Renee Taggart

I have been growing my own garlic for five years now. Each year, when I harvest and offer to share it with others, I'm always surprised by how many people don't know that you can grow your own garlic. So let's change that!

Garlic is a rewarding crop and is incredibly low maintenance. It's also small-space friendly and, once planted, requires relatively little attention until harvest. As with most garden crops, growing your own garlic also gives you control over the varieties you grow.

Garlic prefers full sun and fertile, well-drained soil.

Choosing Your Garlic

There are two main types of garlic: softneck and hardneck.

Softneck garlic produces bulbs with many cloves, including some smaller cloves, and does not develop a central stalk. It is generally better suited to warmer climates and is often the type found in grocery stores.

Hardneck garlic produces fewer cloves per bulb because of the central stalk, but the cloves tend to be more consistently sized and larger. Hardneck varieties are also cold hardy and provide a bonus harvest: garlic scapes.

To grow garlic, source quality seed garlic from a reputable garden supplier. Now is a great time to put your order in. My personal favorite variety currently is Music.

While you can try planting garlic purchased from the grocery store, it may not grow as successfully. Grocery-store garlic may have been stored under conditions intended to prevent sprouting, and the variety may not be well suited to your growing conditions.

Planting Garlic

In Zone 6b, October is generally a good month for planting garlic, although cloves can be planted until the ground freezes.

Separate the bulb into individual cloves, keeping as much of the papery covering intact as possible. Don't worry if some of the paper comes off.

Plant each clove individually with the root end down and the pointed end up, about 2–3 inches deep. Each clove will develop into its own bulb, so the number of cloves you plant will generally equal the number of bulbs you harvest.

Most guides recommend spacing cloves 4–6 inches apart. Personally, I have planted mine about 3 inches apart with success.

After planting, apply a light layer of mulch to help insulate the cloves and moderate soil temperature through the winter.

Spring Care

Garlic is a relatively low-maintenance crop. In my experience, I fertilize with a balanced fertilizer at planting and then side-dress with a balanced fertilizer in the spring as the plants begin active growth.

As the weather warms, the garlic will resume active growth. If desired, you can remove the mulching placed at planting but it is not a must. Keep the plants watered as needed, but avoid keeping the soil overly wet. Good drainage is important throughout the growing season.

The Bonus Harvest: Garlic Scapes

If you grow hardneck garlic, you'll get a bonus harvest of garlic scapes.

Scapes are the curly flowering stalks that emerge from hardneck garlic in late spring or early summer. Many gardeners cut them while they are still young and curled to encourage the plant to put more energy into bulb development.

And don't throw those scapes away!

When harvested while they are young and curled, there are many ways to use them. You can roast scapes and eat them as a side dish, make garlic scape pesto, or dehydrate them and mix them with salt to make a seasoned garlic scape salt.

I made garlic scape salt myself this year, and I will definitely be making it again. It's so good! Garlic scapes have a milder garlic flavor, but also a flavor of their own.

Garlic adjacent, if you will.

Harvesting Garlic

Each leaf of the garlic plant corresponds roughly to a layer of protective paper around the bulb.

When three to four of the bottom leaves have browned, it is generally time to harvest. You should still have several green leaves remaining at the top of the plant.

If possible, refrain from watering for a few days before harvesting. This can make digging the bulbs easier and helps avoid harvesting them from overly wet soil.

Use a garden fork to gently lift the bulbs rather than pulling forcefully on the stalk. Be careful not to puncture or damage the bulbs.

Curing Your Garlic

If you plan to use your garlic right away, there is no need to cure it for long-term storage. Simply brush off any loose soil, trim away the roots and leaves, and use the bulbs as you would any fresh garlic. Keep in mind that uncured garlic has a much shorter storage life, so use it within a relatively short period of time and store it in a cool, dry, well-ventilated location until you're ready to use it.

For long term storage, garlic needs to be cured first. Place the freshly harvested bulbs in a shady, dry, well-ventilated location. Allow the stalks and leaves to completely dry down. Curing time can vary depending on conditions.

Once the garlic is completely dry, gently brush off any loose soil. Trim the roots and cut the stalk, leaving about an inch of stalk attached to the bulb.

Storing Your Garlic

For long-term storage, keep cured garlic in a cool, dark, dry, well-ventilated location.

A root cellar would be perfect, but a cool spot in your home can work just as well. Mine are kept in a net bag in the hallway of my basement stairs.

Avoid storing garlic long-term in the refrigerator. The temperature and humidity can encourage the bulbs to sprout.

Properly cured and stored garlic can provide you with a supply that lasts for months—and potentially right up to your next harvest.

Give It a Try!

I hope this encourages you to try growing garlic. It's a wonderful pantry staple to grow in your garden, takes up relatively little space, requires minimal attention, and gives you the added bonus of garlic scapes if you choose a hardneck variety.

And there's something particularly satisfying about cooking with garlic that you grew yourself!