



Grow Your Own Garlic

By Lynne Marie Sullivan, Master Gardener

Garlic is easy to grow in a home garden. The quality and flavour is far better than grocery store varieties. Use garlic to flavour many dishes, or roast it to make garlic butter. You can also harvest the flower stalks, or *scapes*, early in the season to use in stir-fries and salads.

Soil Preparation

Garlic grows in a wide variety of soil conditions, but prefers a well-drained site with lots of organic matter. Avoid sites that are frequently wet or rocky. Cultivate a new bed to loosen the soil. Apply mature compost to build the soil. Avoid using the same bed that garlic or onions were grown in the previous year. Garlic can also be grown in deep containers or flowerbeds that will not be tilled. Avoid planting garlic near beans, peas and asparagus.

Planting

Choose a **hard-neck** variety of garlic, preferably grown organically in your area. (Do not use grocery store garlic, which is usually imported.) The best time to plant is 4 to 6 weeks before the soil freezes. In southern Ontario, Halloween is usually a good time to plant garlic. The roots get established before winter sets in, and the heads will begin to form as soon as spring arrives.

Preparing Cloves for Planting

Each bulb (head) contains several cloves. The cloves are attached to a basal plate, where the root hairs grow. Break the head apart just before planting, and plant only the biggest cloves from the best bulbs. Each clove will produce one head the following summer.

Planting

The cloves should be spaced about 6-inches apart. Plant each clove with the pointed end up, and at least two inches below the soil surface. Top it with a layer of mulch such as chopped dry leaves (3 to 4-inches deep) to protect the plants from extreme fluctuations in temperature and moisture. In spring, so you can carefully remove the mulch to apply a dusting of blood meal if desired, although this is not essential. Replace the mulch so it is no more than 1-inch deep.

Watering

To get large bulbs with good storage qualities, garlic needs even soil moisture during spring and early summer. If rain is not adequate, water deeply once a week. At the beginning of July, remove any remaining mulch and allow the soil to dry until harvest.

Garlic Scapes

In early summer, hard-neck garlic produces a central flower stalk that often curls and develops a bulb on top. As soon as the bulb begins to form, cut off about half of this stalk to allow the plant to put its energy into growing a bigger root bulb rather than a seed head. The scape can be used in cooking.

Harvesting

Garlic is ready to harvest when about half of the lower leaves turn brown. This is usually in early August. Harvest the garlic *before* the papery wrapper starts to deteriorate or the bulbs begin to split open because these will not store well.

Curing

Use a narrow shovel or pitch fork to loosen the soil around the bulbs, and then gently lift them by hand. They are tender and damage easily. Trim the root hairs with a scissors to make them easier to clean. Do not wash the bulbs, but carefully wipe them with a soft cloth to remove loose dirt. Hang the garlic or lay it in a single layer on newspaper or mesh screen, and then allow the bulbs to dry in a shady, well-ventilated place for 1 to 2 weeks.

Storage

After curing, carefully dust off any remaining dirt with a soft cloth. Garlic stems can be tied together for hanging, or simply cut the stems about 1-inch above the bulb and store in paper bags, cardboard boxes or mesh bags. Do not store in plastic. Keep your garlic in a cool area such as a basement, and protect them from freezing. Be sure to save the best ones for planting in autumn.

For more information about garlic, read the *Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs Publications* 89-096 and 74-095.

Lake Simcoe South Master Gardeners

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