

Growing Garlic

Common garlic, *Allium sativum*, is a very hardy perennial plant native to southern Europe. Botanically, it is closely related to onions, but we are all quite aware that these two plants differ in their strength and pungency as well as the way they grow. Instead of producing one large bulb, as onions do, garlic produces a group of smaller bulbs called cloves.

If your garden grows onions well, you should have no trouble with garlic. Garlic should be grown in a fertile, well-drained loamy soil. Heavy, clay soils often result in misshapen bulbs or no bulbs at all. If you wish to try garlic in a heavy soil, add plenty of organic matter to loosen it up, or plant in raised beds of good soil over the heavy stuff. You should also incorporate 3-5 lbs of 5-10-10 fertilizer per hundred square feet while you are preparing the soil.

In our area, garlic can be set out in the garden either in the fall or in the spring. Get spring-planted garlic in the ground good and early or you will get disappointing results. If you plant in the spring, you will normally harvest during autumn. Traditionally, late October and early November are the best times to plant. Fall-planted garlic is ready for harvest by about July. Although it's not absolutely necessary, a light organic mulch applied after the garlic shoots have come up may help keep most of the frost out of the ground through the winter, or at least prevent frost heaving. Garlic is completely winter hardy. The foliage may be burned back by very low temperatures, but it bounces right back in spring. In the event that fall is dry, it will be necessary to irrigate. Hoeing to reduce weed growth is also highly recommended.

Many of our local garden stores and nurseries sell garlic for planting during the fall. Select cultivars may be available from seed suppliers. If you can't find garlic in these places, buy a few bulbs at the supermarket.

Planting is simply a matter of breaking the bulbs apart and planting each clove separately. Each clove will produce a whole garlic bulb at harvest time. From one full bulb containing around 10 cloves, you should get 100 cloves. When planting, use only the larger cloves. The thin ones, found in the center of the bulb, rarely amount to much. Cloves should be planted 1-2 inches deep and 3-5 inches apart. The rows should be about a foot apart. Press each clove into the soil so that the pointed end is up.

If you don't want to prepare a bed to grow garlic, the cloves can be planted anywhere in the garden where you've got a bit of room (much like tulips, daffodils and crocus). If you do this, make sure they get plenty of sunlight.

When the tops are 6-8 inches tall, side dress (give an extra boost of fertilizer) the garlic with 1 pound of 21-0-0 fertilizer per 100 sq. ft. Allow the plants to grow until the tops dry up and fall over. If the plants seem to want to flower before they mature, break off the flower stalks. Some varieties don't flower but produce a stalk of tiny bulblets. Break these off, too.

In loose soils, garlic can be pulled from the ground. Otherwise, it should be carefully dug out. During dry weather, the bulbs can be left out in the garden for a week to cure or, if it's raining, brought indoors and dried. When the tops are thoroughly dried, cut the stalks so a half-inch or so of neck is left on the bulbs. Cut the roots off, too. Store the bulbs in open-mesh onion bags or in some other way so they are exposed to good air circulation. Garlic stores best where the temperature doesn't go much over 40 degrees and where the relative humidity can be kept lower than 70 percent. A too-cool situation causes them to sprout, and a too-moist environment will cause them to grow roots.

Some gardeners enjoy braiding the tops of garlic to make ornamental chains. If you intend to store your garlic in this manner, be sure you plant a variety with soft necks. Experience and some catalogs will tell you which are the soft-necked garlics. 'Italian Purple Skin', 'Gilroy', 'New York White' and 'Polish White' are soft, and 'German Extra-Hardy' and 'Racambole' are stiff.

Allium ampeloprasum is a great big name for great big garlic. Actually, elephant garlic is not a true garlic, but is more closely related to the leek. Like its relative, the plant gets rather large and has the same broad, flat leaves, folded down their length. Unlike the leek, the underground portion of the plant produces a huge, round bulb that usually consists of a number of large cloves or sometimes just one large, solid round bulb.

Elephant garlic can produce bulbs that measure 5 inches across with the individual cloves over 1 inch in width and 2 inches in length. It does not have the pungency or strength of regular garlic and, according to some authorities, its taste is so different from garlic that it really shouldn't be used as a substitute for it. Be that as it may, elephant garlic is still worth growing, and the seed cloves are becoming more available in our area's nurseries and garden centers. They usually appear at about the same time that spring bulbs begin to be sold in late summer and fall. In fact, in some retail nurseries elephant garlic is displayed with the flowering bulbs. Although this species of *Allium* is sold under many common names such as Elephant, Jumbo, Giant, Oriental and Greatheaded, there's probably not much difference between them. Unlike the several types of common garlic, which are true cultivars and do exhibit differences, all the names for this larger type are probably just designations given by various retailers.

Fall planting of elephant garlic is recommended to eliminate the tendency for it to produce only one large, solid, round bulb with no segments, which spring planting seems to encourage. If you do wait until spring to plant, and this peculiarity does occur, replant these large, solid bulbs again. They will then produce bulbs with the more typical cloves. In other words, it will take two growing seasons to get properly segmented bulbs.

Plant the cloves 1-2 inches below the soil's surface as with regular garlic. Because the plants are larger, you will need to space them 8 inches apart in rows 18 inches from each other. Fertilize, water, weed and harvest elephant garlic just as you would regular garlic.