



It's Garlic Time!

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Pungent, flavorful garlic is a crop no home gardener should be without. Garlic is a relatively undemanding plant with few pest problems. Even a three-foot square patch of ground is large enough to yield at least a dozen bulbs.

You might have noticed that the price of garlic at the grocery store has increased over this past year. That is primarily due to the fact that, with the average American consuming on average 2 pounds of garlic each year, we consume more garlic than we produce. Each year almost 200 million pounds of garlic is imported with about 70% sourced from China. The pandemic has interrupted both supply chains and agricultural production so to ensure your own supply, order some garlic now for fall planting.

In New England, garlic is planted in the fall and harvested in late July or early August. Folks are noticing that already some popular garlic varieties are sold out at major seed/plant companies. This follows the trend we have been seeing all year with an almost frenetic explosion in vegetable gardening activities (including a shortage of pint size canning jars!). So, if garlic is on your agenda, order it now.

The three main types of garlic that are available are hardneck, softneck and elephant garlic. Elephant garlic is quite mild but produces huge bulbs, great for roasting but reputedly not as hardy as the other kinds. Hardneck sorts produce a ring of cloves around a main stem. Favorite varieties include 'Chesnok Red', 'Music' and Spanish Roja'. In general, hardnecks do not store as long as softnecks do.

Softneck garlics produce a layer of cloves around the main stem and as their name implies, they have a flexible neck or stem, which makes them great for braiding. 'Nootka Rose' (heirloom), Inchelium and the Transylvanian, Polish and California softnecks are just some of the varieties available.

Deciding on which to grow is probably the most difficult decision a garlic grower has to make! Regardless of your selection, they are planted, tended to and harvested in a similar fashion.

Wait until the end of October to plant your garlic. Most companies do not ship until at least September. Keep your bulbs cool (50 degrees F is ideal) but do not put them in the refrigerator. A late planting is desirable so the cloves will develop roots but not put on top growth, which happens if planted too early and we have a long, mild fall. This unseasonal production of top growth is said to reduce the size of the bulbs harvested the following summer.

Test your soil before planting. Garlic prefers the pH to be in the mid 6's and is a heavy feeder so make sure the nutrients are optimal for good growth. Work in some compost or other source of organic matter to improve moisture retention.

When planting, separate out the individual cloves and place them 1 to 2 inches deep and 4 to 6 inches apart in rows about 6 inches apart. I like to top my plantings with a couple of inches of shredded leaves or chopped straw and then just wait until plants emerge next spring.

Fertilize your garlic beds as you add nutrients to the rest of your vegetable garden in late April or May. Keep plants weeded and watered.

Two to 4 weeks before the bulbs of hardneck garlic are ready to harvest, the plants produce curled scapes or seedheads. These can be clipped off as soon as they form and used in stir fries or other dishes where a garlicky touch is appreciated. If plentiful, they can even be made into pesto.

Once the bottom leaves turn brown, but a few green leaves remain on the top of the stem, it is time to harvest. Dig bulbs carefully to prevent injury. If a clove is accidentally stabbed, use this bulb first.

Shake off as much soil as you can and leave most of the stem on, but you can cut back dying/dead leaves and a few inches off the top. Hardneck varieties are often tied loosely in bunches and hung to dry while softnecks are spread out on trays. Since I only grow a dozen or so bulbs, I just put my hardnecks in those black plastic trays that annuals come in and leave them in our shaded shed to cure for a week or two.

Properly cured bulbs store longer. If conditions are perfect, your garlic should last until the next batch is harvested. By perfect, the temperature would remain at 50 degrees F with 65 percent humidity. Since most of us would fall short of providing those conditions, plan on having garlic at least until the end of the year.

I always save my biggest, most perfect bulb to replant come late October. Every few years though, I purchase another variety. So far, I have found there are no bad garlics! Garlic aficionados take heart. As of this time the CT Garlic & Harvest Festival is still slated to happen October 10-11 at the Bethlehem Fairgrounds (www.garlicfestct.com).

If you have questions about growing garlic or on any other home or garden topic, feel free to call the UCONN Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at 877.486.6271, visit their web site at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.



1 Garlic cloves being planted



2Garlic Flowers