

Garlic

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Proponents believe that it lowers blood pressure and cholesterol, has natural antibiotic and antiseptic qualities, controls intestinal worms and keeps insect pests and vampires at bay. Its culinary prowess is reason enough to consume this pungent allium, but when it comes to growing your own garlic at home, its all in the timing.



Garlic (*Allium sativum*) is really a perennial bulb. If you can grow a daffodil or a freesia then you can grow your own garlic. It is that easy!

Garlic plants have flat, grey-green spear-like foliage and white, pink or mauve globular flower heads. Just like daffodils and freesias, garlic plants die back after flowering. The garlic we consume is really a series of young bulbs or cloves encased in the papery covering. The cloves are the stored food the plant uses to generate new growth the following season.

Getting the Timing Right

Good gardeners know that spring and summer flowering bulbs must be planted at certain times of year if they are to grow and flower well. This timing varies according climatic conditions. Growing garlic is just the same. While garlic can be grown across a wide range of climates, when you plant your garlic cloves is critical in obtaining good growth and maximising the accumulation of stored food in the new bulbs that develop at the base of each plant.

Out of the Cold

The largest commercial quantities of garlic are grown in cold, dry climates where the cool temperatures seem to enhance the flavour and pungency of the crop. Garlic is planted as a late winter/early spring crop (July - October) in cool regions. Crops planted in July are ready for harvest as early as November with later plantings harvested progressively through until March. Any bulbs that remain unharvested naturally die back during late autumn and winter, reshooting again during the following spring.

Where its Hot

Garlic can also be grown in subtropical and tropical climates. Gardeners in these regions should plant garlic as a late autumn/winter crop (April – July). In some regions first harvest can begin at the end of August. All crops in tropical and subtropical regions should be harvested before December when heat, humidity and the onset of the rainy season will cause bulbs to rot. Under these conditions garlic must be lifted and stored in a cool, dry place or refrigerated to prevent deterioration.

Dusk til Dawn

Like many flower bulbs, traditional varieties of garlic are day length sensitive. The further away you live from the equator, the greater the difference in the number of hours of daylight and darkness that occurs during different seasons. The closer you live to the equator the more likely you are to have twelve hours of daylight and twelve hours of darkness regardless of the time of year.

Garlic plants grow during the cooler months of the year when the days are short and the nights are long. The increasing day length and corresponding shorter periods of darkness that accompany the onset of spring and summer months initiates flowering and bulb formation.

When Big is Best

Some day neutral varieties such as *Glenlarge* and *Southern Glen* have been developed in Queensland. These large-cloved varieties are well suited to subtropical and tropical regions

where the difference in the number of hours of light and darkness is less pronounced. *New Zealand Purple* is a popular commercial variety that produces up to seven large cloves in each purple skinned bulb. It is more tolerant of cold and damp conditions than other varieties.

Elephant or *Russian* garlic (*Allium giganteum*) is really more closely related to leeks than garlic. The bulbs produced are enormous but the cloves are more mild tasting than true garlic.

Sweet Petite

Small and medium sized varieties have fallen from favour with commercial growers. The medium sized cloves of Mexican and Asian garlic varieties produce small purple/white cloves with good flavour. They are suitable across a wide range of climates. *Italian White* produces good flavoured, medium sized cloves. *Marlborough* produces a large cluster of up to fifteen medium sized white cloves that are particularly long keeping.

Taking Stock

Planting stocks of different garlic varieties are rarely available through gardening outlets or mail order catalogues. You can obtain planting stock from your local organic green grocer, but it is best to ascertain whether the garlic is locally produced to try to obtain climatically suitable selections.

Local organic growing groups and seed saver networks may also have varieties suitable for your region. Why not try one bulb of several different varieties in the first planting season to ascertain the one most suited to your region?

Getting Growing

Separate the bulb into individual cloves, choosing plump, well-formed cloves for planting. Place corms pointy end upward into prepared beds, planting them to a depth of 5cm with 15-20cm between each plant. Firm the soil well to prevent the cloves pushing out of the ground as the roots develop.

Garlic requires growing conditions similar to onions. Soil must be well-drained, moderately rich with a pH of 6.5 –7.5. A sunny position and regular watering is required.

Reap Your Rewards

Garlic is harvested after flowering, when the foliage begins to yellow. Cease watering plants a week prior to harvest and bend over the tops to hasten foliage dieback.

Gently lift the entire plant from the soil and leave it to dry in a warm, well-ventilated spot. Shake the excess soil from the bulb and trim the foliage. Hang your garlic at the front door to keep vampires at bay or make the most of its delicious, pungent flavour in the kitchen.



Did You Know

Imported garlic found selling at bargain prices in supermarket outlets is routinely bleached and fumigated with methyl bromide to destroy any potential pests and disease that might otherwise enter Australia on garlic consignments.

A researcher in South Australia recently trialled garlic, seaweed, aloe vera, wormwood and several other organic mixtures as drenches to rid sheep of intestinal worms. Despite the popularity of garlic as a vermifuge (worming agent), wormwood actually proved to be much more effective in killing the internal parasites.