

Raising Garlic

By Joseph Parish



Early winter is quickly approaching and that is the best time of the year to plant garlic. Plant it in the fall or early winter and harvest it in the middle of summer. A few years ago, my wife and I attended a seminar on Growing Garlic sponsored by our state agriculture services. Needless to say, we had placed some cloves of garlic in pots just a week prior to the seminar only to discover that every step of the way we were wrong in what we had done. It's amazing what you can learn from a get together session. In this short article I would like to pass on some of the information which we gain from that class.

The instructor for the two-hour class was a Mr. Fred Silva, who appeared to be a real aficionado of garlic. Fred was a Delaware Master Gardener and he started out by informing us that garlic takes nine months to mature in the ground and another month to actually cure.

It was surprising to discover that there were well over 700 different varieties of Garlic of which many are still unknown. The reasoning for this high number is that a particular type of garlic could be grown for generations in a small village in Asia unknown from the remainder of the world. Suddenly a horticulturist chances upon this village and discovers their strain of garlic. He then brings it home to America and starts to grow it here.

There are two major subdivisions of Garlic known as hard neck and soft neck. The hard neck variety of garlic will send up a central stalk known as a scape. They have large, easily peeled cloves and produce a rich aroma. Usually, the hard neck garlic will have, the more colorful bulbs. They are storable for three to six months.

The soft neck garlic on the other hand is the type found in your grocery store or those seen hanging from a ceiling in braids. Usually, the California Early and California Late are those frequently found in abundance when we go shopping. These types fail to produce a flower spike and are hardier than their related hard neck varieties.

Garlic is generally propagated by planting the cloves or sections of the bulbs. Each clove will grow into another bulb. The bare facts on garlic production are that the larger the clove the larger the plant. Plant only the largest cloves that you have and discard any which may be pitted or tinted blue-green as these are indications of mold. Set your unpeeled cloves, pointy end facing up. The cloves should be planted 6 to 8 inches apart, separated in rows spaced 8 inches from each other. Plant the garlic to a depth of 2 inches deep with the root ends down. If planted upside down the plant will still grow, but will ultimately be of lesser quality. Mulch the area with leaves, or straw to retain the moisture and discourage weeds while protecting the bulbs from the cold. In the spring, remove the mulch so that the sun can warm the soil. Rotate your crops on a three to five-year rotation schedule.

There are no major soil requirements for garlic other than it should be well drained, have a pH of 6 to 7, and no rocks. Fertilizing requirements are simple. Fertilize before planting and in the spring, side dress the plants. Once the garlic leaves have come up, spray the garlic plants with fish fertilizer.

Garlic can be grown in a pot or box, but give it room to grow. Small flower pots simply do not work well. Use deep containers and don't transplant once the garlic starts to grow. The plant does not take well to transplanting. Use a potting soil made up of 1/3 vermiculite, 1/3 peat moss and 1/3 compost. Garlic requires four weeks of 40-degree temperatures. Without being subjected to these temperatures, it will grow leaves, but will not produce adequate bulbs. They should be planted in November and by May you should see some green coming up. Grow your garlic in an area of full sun and keep the soil moist until time to harvest the crop. If you plant your garlic in the spring you can expect fewer and smaller bulb production. You may encounter what are called "rounder" bulbs which are bulbs that have not formed cloves.

When harvesting the soft neck garlic watch for six green leaves to grow and the foliage should begin to turn a shade of yellow or the leaves will fall over. These are indications that the bulbs are reaching their maturity and it is time to harvest the garlic. Begin harvesting your garlic bulbs when 3/4 of the top leaves turn yellow.

When curing the garlic keep clearly in mind that if it is not done properly your garlic will not last. Pull the garlic from the ground and get it immediately out of the sun. Do not bother to shake the dirt from the bulb leave it on. Some people prefer to place their pulled

garlic in five-gallon buckets and place a cloth on top to cure it. Another solution is to take the garlic inside and turn a fan onto it to provide air circulation. You can then string in groups of six and hang them from the ceiling.

A word of advice since garlic takes such a long time to mature make certain that you plant your crop in a location where you will not accidentally disturb it during its dormant time. During the session, the instructor stated how some people often forget where they had planted their bulbs.