

PLANT GARLIC NOW, THANK YOURSELF LATER

A FALL GUIDE TO GROWING YOUR OWN GARLIC

One afternoon in fall. A pantry full of garlic next summer.

Garlic rewards patience better than almost anything in the garden. Plant individual cloves before winter, let the roots establish, and the plant does most of the waiting while you do something else.

BURY A CLOVE. GROW A BULB.

01 Why fall planting works.

Garlic uses cold weather as part of its growth cycle, not as a reason to panic.

In many temperate climates, garlic is planted in fall so roots can begin developing before winter. Cold exposure helps many varieties form distinct cloves, and spring growth begins quickly once conditions warm.

- Plant after the hottest weather has passed but before the ground becomes difficult to work.
- The exact window depends on climate. In cold-winter regions, planting often happens several weeks before the ground freezes hard.
- Too early can produce excessive top growth before winter. Too late can reduce root establishment.
- If your climate has mild winters, choose varieties suited to your region and use local planting guidance.
- Spring planting can produce garlic, but fall planting is usually the better route for full-size bulbs in climates with a true winter.

USE THE CALENDAR AS A CLUE, NOT A COMMAND

Watch soil temperature, local frost timing, and regional advice. Garlic does not care what date an influencer in another climate uses.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

FIND YOUR LOCAL PLANTING WINDOW

Search your state extension service or local cooperative extension for garlic planting guidance, then write the approximate window on your calendar. Use that as a starting point and adjust with your own garden notes.

02 Hardneck or softneck?

The better choice depends on climate, storage goals, and whether you want scapes.

True garlic, *Allium sativum*, is generally grouped into hardneck and softneck types. Both can be excellent. They simply behave differently.

- Hardneck garlic forms a stiff central stalk and usually produces edible scapes. It is often favored in colder winter climates.
- Hardneck varieties often have fewer, larger cloves and rich flavor, but usually do not store as long as good softneck types.
- Softneck garlic usually lacks a rigid central scape, tends to produce more cloves, and generally stores longer.
- Softneck types are commonly used for braiding and can perform well in milder climates.
- Elephant garlic is not true garlic. It is more closely related to leeks and grows differently.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

CHOOSE FOR YOUR KITCHEN

If you want giant easy-to-peel cloves and scapes, start with hardneck. If long storage matters more, include softneck. There is no rule saying you cannot grow both and decide with your mouth.

03 Start with good planting stock.

Every clove carries the potential bulb - and whatever problems came with the original plant.

The easiest route is to buy seed garlic from a reputable grower or nursery that sells varieties appropriate for your region. Grocery-store garlic can sprout, but it may be treated to delay sprouting, poorly adapted to your climate, or carry disease concerns.

- Choose firm, healthy bulbs with no obvious mold, soft spots, rot, or severe damage.
- Keep bulbs whole until close to planting time so individual cloves do not dry excessively.
- Plant the largest healthy cloves for the strongest start; eat the tiny cloves if you have enough planting stock.
- Do not plant cloves from a diseased bulb just because one clove still looks acceptable.
- Once you grow a healthy crop successfully, you can save your best bulbs as next year's planting stock.

BUY ONCE, THEN BUILD YOUR OWN STOCK

Garlic is one of the easiest crops to turn into a self-renewing planting supply. Save the healthiest, best-performing bulbs and your next crop starts in your own pantry.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

SET ASIDE PLANTING BULBS NOW

Before you cook through everything, choose the healthiest bulbs you intend to plant. Label the variety and keep them somewhere cool, dry, and out of direct sun until planting day.

04 Prepare the bed before the cloves arrive.

Garlic wants drainage, sun, room for roots, and soil that is already functioning.

Garlic performs best in a sunny site with well-drained soil. It does not enjoy sitting in winter water, and it is a poor candidate for a compacted bed that turns into a puddle every storm.

- Choose a location with strong sun during the main growing season.
- Fix drainage and compaction problems before planting instead of burying cloves into a bad situation.
- Use a soil test if the bed has persistent fertility or pH problems or if you are considering major amendments.
- Top-dress with finished compost when the soil actually needs organic matter; you do not need to aggressively till it in.
- Keep future foot traffic out of the garlic bed so the soil stays open around developing roots.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

WATER THE EMPTY BED ONCE

Before planting day, water the prepared bed and watch what happens. If water ponds for hours or races off the surface, solve that problem before garlic has to live there all winter.

05 Break bulbs into cloves - gently.

One clove becomes one plant. Keep the papery wrapper intact as much as possible.

Separate bulbs shortly before planting. Each clove should remain firm and protected by its skin. The flat basal plate at the bottom is where roots emerge; the pointed end faces up.

- Separate cloves with your hands rather than smashing the bulb apart.
- Keep the basal plate intact. Damaging it can compromise rooting.
- Discard cloves that are moldy, soft, shriveled, or badly injured.
- Plant each clove individually - do not bury the whole bulb unless you want a crowded clump.
- Keep varieties labeled while separating them. A pile of naked cloves becomes anonymous very quickly.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

MAKE THREE BOWLS

Use one bowl for planting cloves, one for tiny edible cloves, and one for rejects. It keeps planting day moving and prevents you from putting a questionable clove back into the bed because you forgot which one it was.

06 Spacing and depth.

Give bulbs enough room to size up without wasting the whole bed.

Exact recommendations vary with variety, soil, equipment and growing system. For a home garden, a common starting point is several inches between cloves and enough soil above the clove to protect it through winter.

- Plant with the pointed end up and the flat basal end down.
- A useful home-garden starting point is roughly 4 to 6 inches between cloves, with rows spaced so you can weed and harvest comfortably.
- Planting depth varies by climate and mulch. In cold regions, the top of the clove is often several inches below the soil surface.
- Do not pack the soil hard over the cloves. Firm contact is useful; compaction is not.
- Mark row locations before adding a thick mulch layer so spring-you knows where the garlic actually is.

REGIONAL ADVICE WINS

Use local extension guidance for exact depth and timing, especially in very cold, very wet, or unusually warm climates.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

MAKE A SPACING STICK

Mark 4, 5, or 6 inch intervals on a scrap piece of wood or garden stake. Lay it across the bed and planting becomes fast, consistent, and pleasantly boring.

07 Mulch is winter armor.

A blanket of organic material moderates temperature, protects the soil, and can save you a lot of spring weeding.

After planting, cover the bed with a loose organic mulch appropriate for your climate. Shredded leaves and clean straw are common choices. The goal is protection without creating a dense, waterlogged mat.

- Mulch reduces temperature swings and helps protect cloves from frost heaving in cold climates.
- It slows evaporation and protects soil structure from pounding winter rain.
- It suppresses many annual weeds that would otherwise compete in spring.
- Shredded leaves settle more evenly than whole leathery leaves that can mat together.
- If your winter is extremely wet, monitor the bed so mulch is not trapping constant saturation.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

SAVE LEAVES BEFORE GARLIC DAY

Bag or pile shredded leaves when they are abundant. Planting garlic is a lot easier when your mulch is already sitting next to the bed instead of blowing down the street.

08 Garlic can grow in containers too.

No field required - but the container needs enough depth, drainage, and winter protection.

Large containers can grow excellent garlic, especially where in-ground soil is unavailable. The main challenges are drying, freezing, and providing enough root volume for full bulbs.

- Use a deep container with drainage holes and a quality potting mix.
- Space cloves so developing bulbs do not crowd one another.
- Containers experience faster temperature swings than ground soil. In very cold climates, protect them from repeated freeze-thaw cycles.
- Do not move planted garlic into a warm indoor room for winter; many varieties need a cold period.
- Check moisture during winter thaws and early spring because containers can dry out even when the garden looks dormant.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

USE THE BIGGEST CONTAINER YOU CAN MANAGE

Larger soil volume changes temperature and moisture more slowly. One generous planter is usually easier than six tiny garlic pots that need constant babysitting.

09 Spring care is mostly observation.

Garlic is already growing before the rest of the garden looks awake.

As temperatures rise, shoots push through mulch and growth accelerates. Keep weeds down, maintain even moisture, and respond to the bed you have rather than fertilizing from habit.

- Pull mulch aside only if it is physically preventing shoots from emerging; garlic usually grows through loose mulch easily.
- Weed early. Garlic has a relatively narrow canopy and does not enjoy heavy competition.
- Keep moisture consistent during active growth, especially as bulbs begin sizing up.
- If a soil test or crop history indicates a fertility need, address it early enough to support vegetative growth rather than dumping fertilizer on near harvest.
- Stop trying to make every yellow lower leaf a crisis. Some leaf decline is normal as harvest approaches.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

MARK THE FIRST YELLOW LEAF

Take a photo when the first lower leaf begins to yellow and keep watching weekly. Garlic teaches harvest timing through a pattern of leaf senescence, not a single dramatic signal.

10 Scapes are the bonus harvest.

Hardneck garlic sends up a flower stalk before the bulb is ready.

The curling scape appears in late spring or early summer on hardneck garlic. It is edible, delicious, and often removed while tender so the plant can continue directing resources into bulb development.

- Harvest scapes while they are still tender, commonly after they begin to curl.
- Cut or snap them above the top leaves without damaging the plant.
- Use them like a garlicky green vegetable in pesto, eggs, stir-fries, soups, or grilled dishes.
- Leaving a few scapes can help you observe the plant and learn the variety's full growth cycle.
- Softneck garlic generally does not produce the same familiar scape harvest.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

EAT THE CALENDAR CLUE

Write down the date you harvest scapes. Over several years, that date becomes one of your local signs that bulb harvest is getting closer.

11 Know when to harvest.

Too early gives you undersized bulbs. Too late can split wrappers and reduce storage life.

Garlic is generally harvested when several lower leaves have browned while multiple upper leaves remain green. Those remaining green leaves correspond roughly to wrapper layers protecting the bulb, so waiting until the whole plant is dead can leave bulbs exposed.

- Do not pull garlic by the stem. Loosen the soil with a fork or shovel beside the bulb and lift gently.
- Test one plant before harvesting the entire bed. Look for well-defined cloves and intact wrappers.
- If bulbs are still round and poorly divided, give them more time.
- If wrappers are splitting and cloves are separating, you waited longer than ideal for storage garlic.
- Harvest in reasonably dry conditions when possible and handle bulbs gently to avoid bruising.

DO NOT WASH STORAGE GARLIC

Brush off loose soil and cure bulbs with skins intact. Adding water before curing can increase the risk of storage problems.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

SACRIFICE ONE BULB TO KNOWLEDGE

Dig one test bulb when the lower leaves begin browning. If it is not ready, the rest stay put. One test harvest is cheaper than ruining the entire crop with impatience.

12 Cure it before you store it.

Harvest is not finished when the bulb leaves the ground.

Curing allows outer wrappers and neck tissue to dry so bulbs store better. Keep freshly harvested garlic somewhere shaded, dry, and well ventilated. Avoid direct hot sun and rain.

- Leave tops and roots attached during curing unless your chosen method says otherwise.
- Spread or hang bulbs so air can circulate around them rather than piling them into a damp heap.
- Curing commonly takes a few weeks depending on humidity, airflow, and bulb size.
- When necks and wrappers are thoroughly dry, trim roots and tops if you are not braiding softneck garlic.
- Set aside damaged bulbs for early use rather than long storage.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

CREATE A CURING ZONE BEFORE HARVEST

Decide where the garlic will cure before you dig it. A shaded porch, garage, shed, or other dry ventilated area is useful. A crop piled on the kitchen floor because you forgot this step is less charming than Instagram suggests.

13 Store it like food, not decoration.

Cool, dry, dark, and ventilated keeps garlic useful much longer.

Storage life varies by type and conditions. Softneck garlic often stores longer than hardneck, but both benefit from steady conditions and good airflow.

- Keep bulbs out of sealed plastic bags where trapped moisture can encourage rot.
- Use mesh bags, baskets, braids, or other ventilated storage.
- Avoid warm, humid areas and direct sunlight.
- Check stored bulbs occasionally and remove any that begin to rot or soften.
- Keep your planting stock separate so dinner does not accidentally eat next year's garden.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

MAKE TWO BASKETS

One basket is for eating. One is clearly labeled NEXT YEAR. Put the best healthy bulbs in the planting basket before anyone begins cooking with the harvest.

14 Save your best garlic and repeat.

This is where one purchase starts becoming a garden tradition.

Choose planting stock from healthy bulbs that performed well in your conditions. Over time, consistently saving from your strongest plants can help you build a strain that works well in your garden - while still paying attention to disease and maintaining healthy stock.

- Save medium-to-large, well-formed bulbs from healthy plants.
- Do not automatically eat every giant bulb if your goal is to improve future harvests.
- Keep varieties labeled through curing and storage.
- Record planting date, scape date, harvest date, bulb size, storage performance, and anything unusual about the season.
- If a planting line develops persistent disease or declining vigor, replace or refresh stock from a clean reputable source.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

CHOOSE NEXT YEAR BEFORE DINNER

Set aside planting bulbs the day you finish curing. That one decision turns garlic from a yearly purchase into a cycle.

PLANT IN FALL. LET WINTER DO ITS PART.

THE WHOLE GUIDE IN TEN LINES:

- Choose garlic suited to your climate and kitchen.
- Buy healthy planting stock or save healthy bulbs from your own crop.
- Plant individual cloves point-up in well-drained soil.
- Give bulbs enough room to size up.
- Mulch the bed and keep traffic out of it.
- Weed early and water consistently during active spring growth.
- Eat the scapes if you grow hardneck.
- Harvest while several upper leaves are still green.
- Cure bulbs completely before storage.
- Save the best healthy bulbs for next year before you eat them all.

The easiest way to have garlic next year is to think about next year while this year's bulbs are still in your hands.