

Any Gardener Can Grow Garlic - Part 2 by Paul Pospisil

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The Three Harvests of Garlic

With garlic, there are three harvests or crops you can use:

- The first harvest is in early spring, when garlic plants are about a foot tall. You can either cut some greens or pull some complete plants as scallions and use them in your cooking as a source of fresh garlic.
- The second harvest is the scapes. Around mid June, hardneck garlic varieties send up a round stalk or scape. When the scapes curl, snap them off. This enables the plants to put their energy into bulb formation. The scapes are delicious and should not be discarded but used in place of garlic bulbs. They contain loads of garlic oil and have the same health benefits as the bulbs. Scapes can be refrigerated in plastic bags for about 3 months.
- The main harvest is when the underground bulbs are dug, cured and stored for fall and winter use. This is the most critical harvest requiring meticulous care to give you top quality, keeping garlic. Careless harvesting can ruin a fine crop of garlic.

Harvest preparations start a month ahead of the actual date that the bulbs are lifted and activity doesn't finish until two weeks later when the cured garlic is put away in storage. After scape removal, the underground bulbs start to swell and grow quickly over the next month. Little special care is needed as the plant is transferring energy from the leaves to the bulbs. In the event of a very dry year, watering may be needed for the latter part of June. However, stop watering around the first of July to let the bulbs mature.

Garlic is ready to be dug between the first week of July through to mid August, depending on variety and strain.

When to Dig the Bulbs

Exactly when to dig the bulbs is a little tricky. Lifting them too early will give undersize bulbs that don't store well, and a few days too late will result in bulbs lacking the protective wrappers around the cloves. I've found that you have only about 3-7 days in which to harvest successfully.

Watch the Greens

The green leaves start to die from the bottom up. When the bottom 3 or 4 leaves are dead and the top 5 or 6 are still green, its time to lift the bulbs. If you're not sure, dig a bulb or two and check. A mature bulb is fully swelled, well sized and has some partially decomposed wrappers.

Pick a dry day for harvesting.

Handle Garlic Like Eggs

Garlic is very fragile and should not be bumped, bounced or dropped. Manual harvesting is recommended, as even the smallest bump will bruise the garlic, causing early decay and loss of quality. Carefully lift the bulbs

with a garden fork and take them, greens and all, for cleaning and curing. Don't leave garlic in the hot sun but move it quickly to a shady spot to avoid 'cooking'.

Cleaning

If your soil is a sandy loam, any dirt can be gently brushed off. Clay soils tend to adhere to the bulbs and may need to be washed off with a gentle spray of fresh water. Trim roots to 1/4 " and carefully remove any dirt from the roots.

Curing

Garlic needs about 2 weeks to cure in order to prepare it for winter storage. Either hang it in bundles of 10-12 or place on mesh racks in an airy, ventilated drying shed. Your carport or barn works well for this purpose. Ensure a good airflow and protection from direct sunlight. Cured garlic is then trimmed to remove stalks, placed in containers and taken to storage. It can also be braided for convenience of storage and use.

Storage

Best storage temperatures are low, 32-35 F, or room temperature, 60-70 F, at low humidity. Never store garlic in the refrigerator as temperatures of 40-50 F will start premature growth. I believe that garlic is best stored in braids, with some hanging in your kitchen where it is convenient to use. Extra braids go in your cold room or pantry. Different strains and varieties of garlic have different storage lives, varying from 6 months for 'pickling' garlic to as long as 11 or 12 months for some of the softneck strains.

Garlic Braids

Garlic braids are a practical means of storing garlic. Braids can be simple bundles held together with string or more elaborate pigtail braids (used for softneck garlic) or string braids (for hardneck garlic). They may be decorated with dried grasses or flowers and ribbon to serve the dual purpose of a kitchen decoration. If you wish to braid garlic, do this before the garlic is completely cured, while the stems are still pliable. The braided garlic is then left in the drying shed to complete the curing process. Again, avoid bruising garlic during braiding by working on a soft surface.

Using Garlic

Garlic is for eating, for health and for flavour in cooking. Even if you make or buy garlic for decoration, remember to eat it. Fresh garlic has the best flavour and gets stronger with age. Crush or finely slice garlic to bring out the health-giving allicin compound before using. To reduce the sulphur odour, cook garlic and chew fresh parsley as a breath freshener.

A clove of garlic a day, on average, is a suitable amount to include in a healthy diet. This equates to about 45 garlic bulbs of Rocambole garlic or 4 braids worth per year. Garlic lovers or gourmands, of course, may wish to stock up on more!