

# Any Home Gardener Can Grow Garlic - Part 1

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Garlic is a fascinating plant, with its hundreds of strains and varieties, its unique growing cycle, the folklore surrounding it and its real and mystical powers. It has been cultivated in every civilization for thousands of years for both its health-giving properties and tasty flavour.

Any gardener can grow great garlic. The cultural approach is different from other vegetables, but it's not difficult to grow.

If you wish to grow garlic, plan on growing organically from the start. It makes little sense to grow a health-giving plant and then contaminate it with toxic, synthetic chemicals. Garlic thrives in nutrient-rich organic soil. It is a fragile bulb, requiring careful handling. It lends itself well to organic methods.

### **Growing Cycle**

In our northern climate, garlic is planted in October, sets roots before freeze-up, rests over the winter, resumes growth the following April and is harvested in July or August. Spring planting does not produce satisfactory results.

### **Site Selection**

Pick a location with good soil, drainage, full sun and proximity to water for irrigation. The plot should provide for space rotation, as garlic should not return to the same bed where any allium grew in the last three years.

### **Soil**

Rich soil, high in organic matter and full of microorganisms is the key to organic garlic production. Start with loam, if possible. Sandy soil dries out easily and should be avoided. Clay soils can be built up over a number of years with large amounts of compost. In building up the soil, use liberal amounts of organic matter (compost or composted animal manure) and grow green manures and legume crops for plough-down. Wood ash can be sprinkled to provide potassium. Take a soil test to maintain soil balance. A soil pH within the range 6.0-7.5 is acceptable.

### **Bed Preparation**

Garlic may be grown in flat rows or in raised beds. Raised beds have the advantages of deeper soil for the roots, earlier thawing in the spring and good drainage. Either till the soil just before planting or plant through an earlier-planted cover crop. Annual cover crops like annual rye grass don't need to be tilled under, as they will form mulch when they freeze. Make trenches in rows at least 12 inches apart and 4-5 inches deep in which to set the cloves.

### **Selection of Planting Stock**

You have a large choice of what type of garlic to grow, anywhere from the tall, majestic Porcelains which grow up to 6 feet tall and produce huge bulbs of only four cloves, through to the short, softneck Artichokes, often called 'Italian' garlic, which grow from 12-15 cloves per bulb. Most home gardeners start with a Rocambole strain of 7-8 cloves per bulb. Whatever your choice, get it from a local grower. Avoid trying to grow garlic found on grocery shelves. It's likely imported and not suitable for our climate.

### **Cracking into Cloves**

Take the bulbs and carefully divide them into their separate cloves. Garlic is propagated vegetatively, and it is the clove that is planted as 'seed'. Set aside any damaged cloves as even a little nick can foster green mould disease.

### **Planting**

Hand planting is preferable. Place the clove vertically in the trench, basal end down (pointy end up) and press it gently into the soil. Mechanical planting devices generally drop the cloves in random fashion, resulting in crooked stems. Cover the garlic by filling the trench, ensuring at least 4 inches of soil cover.

### **Mulching**

Garlic should be mulched to insulate it against mid-winter thaws and resulting winterkill. Wait until the ground is frozen, usually November, and then mulch with 4-6 inches of clean straw. The same mulch can be kept on the following summer to help keep down weeds and preserve moisture.

### **Spring Care**

Even before the frost is out of the ground, the garlic spears will be seen poking up through the mulch. Carefully move the mulch away from the row to enable faster thawing and rapid growth.

### **Inspection, Weeding and Watering**

Inspect the garlic by walking the rows twice weekly. Hand -pull any weeds that emerge through the mulch. Look for any yellowed or diseased garlic and remove it right away to prevent spread. Garlic needs a steady supply of moisture so irrigate to supplement rainfall, giving it a total of one inch per week.

### **Fertilizing**

If you started with a rich organic soil, no added feeding is needed. Otherwise, add nitrogen very early in the growing season by means of a watering with manure tea or a kelp or fish foliar spray.

Garlic lends itself readily to organic methods. It is bothered by few insect pests\* and, if carefully handled and grown in healthy soil, is relatively unaffected by disease. Beautiful, tasty, top quality bulbs are the result when garlic is handcrafted organically. The harvest is the tasty reward for your hard work of growing garlic. Harvesting must be carried out carefully, by hand, in order to get top-quality bulbs that will store well over the winter.

\* The arrival of the leek moth in Ontario and Quebec has posed the first serious insect threat to garlic. This hardy plant is no longer free from insect damage!