

HOW WE PLANT GARLIC

WAGON ROAD GREENHOUSE, SOUTH KILLINGLY, CT 774-1555

In Northeast Connecticut, with the coldest winter temperature seldom dipping below zero, most garlic survives readily.

PREPARATION

We plant garlic between October 1st and 15th. To prepare we spend many evenings with boxes of garlic heads, which we break apart into individual cloves. The cloves of fresh garlic are very tight, and to facilitate separation, we use the stem for leverage. If we need additional separating power, we carefully utilize a butter knife. This may indirectly penetrate the flesh, so we use the damaged cloves for cooking soon thereafter. We don't mind damaging a few cloves, it fills the room (and our fingers) with the wonderful smell of garlic.

To prepare the ground, we roto-till an area large enough to accommodate our planting. We plant individual cloves six inches apart. We usually plant all our vegetables in four foot wide beds so we do the same with garlic, five or six cloves across the bed and six inches apart works well. If you prefer, you can plant garlic in a single row, but it will not be the most efficient use of space. Fit your planting pattern into your own garden design.

Once roto-tilled, we spread good compost or 5/10/10 fertilizer. If using the latter, spread two pounds per 100 square feet. Another pass with the tiller turns the fertilizer or compost under.

PLANTING

We run a string on two stakes along the edge of the bed. This will be our guide for positioning our planting board so that we can keep a straight line. We use a five inch wide board marked every six inches to identify where to plant the individual cloves. We plant five across, six inches apart, but you can do whatever works for you. We align our board parallel to the previous row to plant the next row.

The roto-tiller makes the soil nice and loose so that all we do is push each clove down as far as we can, root end first. If your soil is not loose enough, you can use a garden trowel or dibbler to make each hole. The end result should be that there is at least one inch of soil on top of the cloves. Two inches would be even better.

You can cover as you do each row or wait till the end. We do the latter, and gently pull the backside of a metal garden rake over the surface to fill in the holes above the cloves.

That's it! The garlic is planted. With adequate moisture, the cloves will begin to grow roots.

WINTER CARE

In order to keep the ground at somewhat of a constant temperature, once the soil freezes (around Thanksgiving), mulch the entire bed with straw. We don't recommend using hay

which may have seeds that would sprout in the spring. Mulch to approximately four inches thick. The mulch will have the added benefit of preventing weeds from growing in the spring.

SPRING ARRIVES

One idea you might consider is to remove the straw in the spring before the garlic sends up its leaves. Exposing the soil will tend to warm the ground and encourage growth of the garlic. The flip side however, is that you sacrifice the weed control and moisture retention the straw can provide.

During April and especially May, the soil begins to warm up and the garlic becomes more vigorous. If you didn't fertilize in the fall, or if excessive rainfall washed away all the nutrients in the soil, this is the time to fertilize again.

The leaves can be over twelve inches tall by mid-May. In June stiff-neck garlic will develop a "scape", a long curly stem with a seed pod on its end. The seed pods must be cut off so that all the plant's energy will go into making a large head of garlic. A small pruner or sturdy scissors does the trick. Garlic scapes have great fresh garlic flavor. Chop them up and use them as you wish.

EARLY SUMMER

This is the critical time for the garlic to grow to its final size. One inch of water per week (more if it's unusually hot or your soil is very sandy) is necessary for good growth. Don't fertilize now, as this might interfere with the maturity of the garlic and eventually its storage capacity. Garlic can last for one year after harvest, so treat it well during its growing time.

HARVEST

When is the garlic ready? We pull ours when one-third of the leaves turn yellow or brown. This begins with the leaves closest to the ground. Some growers wait until half of the leaves turn yellow. If you wait too long, the head will begin to separate and the garlic will not store well for the winter.

Once pulled (or dug if you can't pull it) garlic should be hung in a dark, well ventilated place for two to three weeks, or until all the leaves have turned brown. Basements are usually too moist for this purpose. Garages or sheds with windows or doors open are better. Once dried, we cut off the tops and most of the roots. At the same time, we rub off all the dirt. Use a stiff brush, if needed, being careful not to remove too many of the protective skins.

Store your garlic in a cool, dry area of the house in a container that allows for air circulation. A box with holes in the sides works well. There's nothing like fresh garlic to flavor a dish of greens, sauce, soups, etc. Enjoy!