

# Garlic 101

*Allium sativum*, AKA garlic, is considered a perennial flowering plant. Most widely used as a culinary seasoning, garlic has been present for thousands of years. It is also used as a traditional medicine. It is said that garlic repels rabbits, moles and vampires, although I cannot confirm the last one!

## There are two types of garlic with many cultivars in each type.

- Hardneck varieties have a scape, a rigid flower stalk, that can be eaten.
  - Hardneck varieties grow better in colder climates because they need to undergo vernalization to set bulbs. Vernalization occurs when the planted clove is exposed to temperatures below 40 degrees for at least 40 days. Sounds about right for Michigan!
  - Hardneck varieties have a shorter shelf life; three to five months.
- Softneck varieties do not grow scapes.
  - These varieties are better suited for warmer climates because they do not need vernalization to set bulbs.
  - Softneck varieties can be stored for eight to twelve months.
- Southeastern Michigan climate zones range from 5b to 6b, so try both types to discover which grows best in your garden.

## Choosing garlic bulbs for planting

- Organically grown garlic bulbs from a farmer's market or reputable nursery are the best choice.
  - Garlic bulbs from the grocery store usually come from China and have been treated to prevent sprouting.
  - Grocery store garlic is usually the softneck variety which is not cold hardy below zone 6.

## Fall planting in Michigan

- Plant cloves in the fall, 6 weeks before the expected first frost date.
- Divide the bulb into individual cloves keeping the papery skin intact. Place the cloves in the soil with the clove end (tapered side) facing up. Cloves should be planted about 2 inches deep and spaced 6-8 inches apart. Space 12-18 inches between rows.
- Mulch heavily with mulch or straw.

## Spring – Summer

- Hardneck garlic cloves produce green flower stalks called scapes. If left to grow, they will take energy away from the bulb formation and result in smaller bulbs.
  - In southeast Michigan scapes usually emerge in June.
  - Wait to cut the scape until the center stalk grows above the plant's leaves and it begins to curl or spiral. Cut the scape as far down into the plant as possible without damaging the leaves.
  - The scapes are edible, so use them in salads, soups or sauces.
- Water the garlic plants every 3 to 5 days throughout the growing season.
- Fertilize and weed as necessary. If the foliage yellows early in the growing season, side dress with a vegetable fertilizer. Always follow label instructions.

## Harvesting Garlic

- Harvest when the leaves turn yellow and begin to die off. In southeastern Michigan this will happen in July or August. Carefully loosen the planting area with a garden fork. Gently remove the bulbs without breaking them, keeping the stalks intact. Brush off excess dirt.
  - Don't harvest the garlic too late in the season - the bulbs will shrivel, and the garlic won't be good to eat.
  - Garlic harvested too early won't cure properly.

## Curing

- It is important to let the bulbs cure for 2 weeks. During this time the skin will dry, and the bulb will become firm. Store the harvested garlic in a cool, dry place for curing. I cure mine on elevated window screens.
  - You can cut off the stem and cure the garlic bulbs individually in a storage bin. Make sure they get plenty of air circulation.
  - A popular way to cure and store garlic is to leave the stems attached and braid them, then hang the garlic braid in a cool, dry place.
  - You can also cure your garlic by hanging the cloves upside down in a warm, shaded area with the leaves attached.

## Enjoy

- Use garlic when the skin is dry and papery. The cloves should be firm to the touch, and easy to pull apart.
- Save the best and largest bulbs for next season's planting or enjoy them all and buy new bulbs at your favorite garden center.

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