

Ask a Master Gardener
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Growing Garlic

Q. I love to cook with fresh garlic. Would I be able to grow it in a raised bed? Can I plant the garlic I buy at the grocery store?

A. First, garlic is easy to grow. Many cooks, like you, use it to enhance the flavors of foods. It has proven health benefits, and it will add color to the fall garden. All are very good reasons to add this herb to your garden. Late September to November is the time to plant garlic in West Georgia. Garlic will be ready to harvest in early summer when the leaves fall to the ground and begin to turn yellow.

Garlic grows best in full sun and well-drained soil, which make raised beds great for growing garlic. Tilling the soil helps to prepare a crumbly, loamy fertile soil which is very important for proper bulb formation. Heavy clay soils can cause misshaped bulbs and make for a difficult harvest. Amend clay soil with organic matter and sand. A soil test will determine which nutrients and fertilizers are needed. Consistent soil moisture is important during bulb growth, but drier conditions are most suitable when the bulbs are approaching maturity.

Garlic is related to onions, shallots, and leeks. It is a good idea to practice crop rotation when planting garlic. Do not plant garlic where onions or members of the onion family have been planted previously.

There are many kinds (cultivars) of garlic. They differ in color, shape, taste, number of cloves, pungency and storability. The two basic types of garlic are soft necked (*Allium sativum*) and hard necked (*Allium ophioscorodon*). Soft necked types do not make a seed stalk and keep longer than hard necked types. Hard necked types peel more easily and produce a seed stalk. They both taste like you would expect garlic to taste. Elephant garlic is not really garlic at all, but rather a relative of the leek. It does taste more like garlic than a leek, however.

Garlic from the grocery store might be treated to prevent it from sprouting, so purchase the bulbs you plant from catalogs or garden centers. The bulbs will come with growing suggestions. Plant garlic by dividing the bulb into cloves. Cloves from the outside of the bulb will make the largest bulbs, but all cloves may be used. Plant each clove 4 to 6 inches apart and at a depth of about one inch. Plant the clove with the pointy end up and do not remove the papery skin.

Garlic has a shallow root system so weed control is essential for good bulb development. Hand picking weeds and mulching are the best ways to accomplish a weed free environment. Mulching is done after the garlic emerges, however. And the mulch should not cover the sprouts. It takes from six to eight months for garlic to mature.

Bulbs will be ready to harvest when 1/3 to 1/2 of the leaves have turned yellow and fallen down, usually late May to mid-June. Use a spading fork to loosen the soil and facilitate lifting the bulbs. Allow the bulbs to dry in a shady, warm place for several days. When thoroughly dry cut off the tops and store.

Stored garlic bulbs will last for months in a cool, dark, well ventilated space. Do not let garlic freeze if it is being stored through the winter in a cellar. It is not recommended to store bulbs in the refrigerator. However, you may peel and store garlic cloves in a glass jar in the refrigerator for a short time, making it convenient to use them in cooking.

Good luck next spring on your new crop and your delicious meals! For answers to your gardening questions contact a Carroll County Master Gardener volunteer at 770-836-8546 or visit the Carroll County Ag Center, 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.