

Growing Your Own Garlic **By Joan Sapp**

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This article was first published September 29, 2017. Here it is again, just in time for fall planting of this easy-to-grow allium.

I am working in a garden and wafting through the air is the smell of spaghetti sauce-GOOD spaghetti sauce. Or it might only be garlic and onion in olive oil, the base for so many delicious dishes.

Gardeners can grow their own garlic and now is a good time to plant, so the bulbs can set roots and get established before the winter gets really cold.

Start, as one must for most plants, by building the soil. Dig in lots of compost or well-rotted manure and a fertilizer that is high in phosphorus and potassium rather than nitrogen, the first number in the sequence on the bag. Let this sit through the first frost while you research the type you want to plant.

You can choose from two general types of garlic: hardneck and softneck. The "neck" in the names refers to the stalk that grows upward from the garlic bulb. Hardnecks have a stalk that stems from the center of the bulb and turns rigid at maturity. Softnecks stalks are actually made up of leaves rather than a central stalk. The leaves remain soft and flexible at maturity. Hardneck types are generally hardier and better for cool weather growing. Spanish Rojo has a much favored, true garlic flavor but being a hardneck does not keep as long as the softneck type.

Once you've made your choice, slightly compact the soil so the bulb has good support. Gently break a garlic bulb into individual cloves taking care not to damage the clove. Tuck the clove into the soil--wide or root end down--and the tip just under the soil surface. Place them 3-6 inches apart in rows about 1 foot away from each other. Water well. Top with chopped leaves or alfalfa hay 4-6 inches thick as mulch. A floating row cover or raised layer of 6 mil plastic increases the temperature around the bulbs all winter.

Green shoots pushing out of the mulch signal spring. The bulbs may not have grown much, yet are ready to take off with the lengthening daylight. Give the growing shoots even moisture, about 1 inch of water each week.

Somewhere around mid-July the stalk will start yellowing at the base. This is an approximate indicator of harvest time and a sign to withhold water. Over watering can result in compromised keeping qualities. Carefully dig a garlic bulb to see if you can feel the bumps of the cloves through the skins. Intact skins are important if you will store your garlic. When the cloves are good size dig them out. Leave stalks and roots on as the bulbs dry for a couple of weeks in a well-ventilated, shaded area.

Use a similar method to grow other members of the allium family-onions and shallots- just start in early spring rather than fall. Try intermediate or day neutral onions, or bandit leeks. And don't forget food for the soul, with flowering alliums. Do plant these in fall. Alliums tolerate drought, have no serious diseases or insect pests, and you won't ever have to worry about rodents or deer, since they seem to have no appreciation for the taste of onions — ornamental or otherwise.

Joan Sapp earned her degree in landscape architecture from Colorado State University in 1998, specializing in plants and native systems. She currently owns a landscape company in Estes Park, CO, where she and her husband live. Estes Valley Community Garden thanks Joan for sharing her gardening experience with her fellow high-elevation gardeners.