

Growing Garlic in Montana

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Garlic does well in Montana and is easy to grow. You need to remember to plant it in the fall, in most parts of the state.



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GARLIC HAS BECOME VERY POPULAR OVER THE

past decade and fortunately is one of the few plants that will do quite well in most areas of our state. It tolerates our cold winters and short growing seasons. If planted at the right time and with minimum care, it will produce all the garlic the average family needs. If you grow good onions you can grow good garlic.

There are no wild types of modern garlic found anywhere in the world, but we believe today's garlic originated somewhere in Central Asia. It has been cultivated for at least 5000 years. The Egyptians wrote about garlic in 3200 B.C. and the Greek historian Herodotus reported that laborers who built the Cheops pyramid about 2900 B.C. lived mostly on onions and garlic. Four garlic bulbs were found in King Tut's tomb, and the pyramid builders went on what might have been the first strike in history when their garlic rations were decreased. Roman laborers ate garlic regularly and Roman gladiators ate garlic before combat. Over 2500 years ago, the plant spread from the Mediterranean area eastward into China, and the bulbs were used in Indian medicine at least as early as the 6th century B.C.

Although we eat relatively little garlic, the bulbs themselves are an excellent source of selenium and a good source of protein, phosphorus, iron and potassium.

Choose the right kind of garlic

Garlic is a close relative of the onion, shallot, chive and leeks. There are three kinds of garlic usually offered in seed catalogs.

Softneck (*Allium sativum* var. *sativum*): These garlic bulbs have necks so soft the harvested plants are easy to braid into a rope of bulbs. It is the strongest-flavored garlic and stores the best, but is slightly less winter hardy than the stiff-necked garlic.

Try the cultivars Dixon, Inchelium and New York White ('Polish White').

Stiffnecked (*Allium sativum* var. *ophloscorodon*): This is also called Rocambole garlic. It produces a hard scape (stalk) that makes a 360 degree coil, then forms a cluster of bulblets at its tip. It is the most winter hardy garlic and milder in taste and easier to peel than the softnecked. Unfortunately, it is difficult to braid because of the woody scape. You can increase bulb size by up to one-third by pinching off the scapes. Remove the scapes as they form and add them to your favorite stir-fry, or use the bulblets that form the same way. Bulblets can be planted next year to get full sized bulbs in two years. Garlic is ready to be harvested when the scapes unink.

'Roja', 'German Extra-Hardy', 'Purple Italian', and 'Blue Italian' should do well in your garden.

Elephant (*Allium ampelo-prasum*): This popular garlic produces large bulbs up to ½ pound in size (under highly fertile conditions). Its cloves are mild-flavored and easy to peel, but the plant is the least winter hardy of the common garlics and the bulbs will not keep as long.

Planting time

There has been much discussion about the right time to plant garlic. Traditionally, garlic is planted in very early spring and harvested at the end of summer. This schedule works for growing seasons such as those in some areas of eastern Montana. However, many parts of the state really have no spring, going almost directly from cold weather to hot. Because of the physiology of bulb formation this condition leads to disappointing yields.

Many gardeners have better luck planting garlic between mid-September and mid-October. The plants develop a strong root system, overwinter, and are harvested the following summer. If you decide on fall planting, be sure to mulch your plants with about six inches of straw to protect them from winter heaving and desiccation. Omit the mulch if you can count on a snowcover for most of the winter. The plants will grow beneath the snow and may be two inches tall as the snow melts.

If you plant early enough in the fall so that the plants send up several inches of leaf growth, be sure to protect them from deer which will sometimes eat the leaves down to the ground.

Planting

Store bulbs for planting stock at temperatures between 40°F and 50°F. If they are stored below 40°F, bulbs on the resultant plants will be rough and mature too early. The early maturity can result in smaller bulbs and lower yields. If the bulbs have been stored above 50°F, their sprouting and maturity will be delayed, which also could reduce yields.

Each bulb is made up of several cloves held together by a thin membrane. Each clove consists of two miniature leaves and a vegetative bud. Separate the cloves just before planting and plant only the larger outer ones. Use the smaller inner cloves for cooking, since the size of the resultant bulb is directly related to the size of the clove planted. Plant small cloves and you'll get small bulbs.

Garlic does best on rich, fertile, well-drained soil high in organic matter and with a slightly acid pH. Turn under about five pounds of 5-10-10 fertilizer or equivalent per 100 square feet before planting. Work some compost or other rotted organic material into the soil at this time.

Set the cloves into the soil right-side up about two inches deep and four to six inches apart in rows about 12 inches apart. Five feet of row will satisfy the average person for one year. You'll need about one pound of cloves to plant 20 feet of row. Garlic does best when planted in a sunny location but will tolerate partial shade.

How garlic grows

Garlic is a cool season plant. It makes all of its leaf growth while the temperatures are cool and the days short. As the temperatures warm and the days lengthen, the plant stops making leaves and begins to form bulbs about mid-June. A large amount of leaf growth can support large bulbs. Spring-set plants often have too little time to produce enough top before they begin to bulb, hence the disappointing

yield. Additionally, exposure of the cloves or young plants to temperatures of between 32° and 50°F for one to two months hastens subsequent bulbing under long days. So exposure to moderate winter conditions is beneficial, producing good yields, while bulbs stored or plants grown in temperatures above 77°F may not bulb at all. In a nutshell, cool weather and short days make garlic leaves; heat and long days make the bulbs. If the plants have poor leaf development, the bulbs will be puny.

To increase bulb size, pinch off the scapes on stiffnecked garlic and the flowers on Elephant garlic as they form.

Fertilization and irrigation

Garlic has a small, shallow root system. Irrigate regularly to keep the plants growing but slack off a bit when the bulbs begin to form (early July). Side-dress with a complete fertilizer like 5-10-10 when the tops are about four inches tall and again about a week after bulbing begins.

Harvest

Garlic bulbs mature in late July and August. The time to harvest is when about half the leaves on the plant have browned and dried, and stiffened scapes have unkinked. Loosen the soil with a fork, gently pull the plant from the ground, shake off the soil from around the roots without bruising the bulbs, and air dry the bulbs (with tops intact) in the shade for a few weeks. Placing the bulbs on a window screen or a rack made from poultry fencing or hardware cloth works well. When the bulbs have cured, remove the tops about an inch from the top of the bulb and store the bulbs in a wide-meshed bag, such as an onion or grapefruit bag, hung in a well-aerated location. If you wish you can braid the tops of softnecked garlic together into a garland to hang in the kitchen or garage.

Sound garlic bulbs will keep for a few months when stored in a refrigerator but will keep longest (six to eight months) when stored near freezing at 65 to 70 percent humidity. The bulbs will sprout if stored above 41°F.



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