

Garlic: The Last Thing I Plant—and the First Thing to Welcome Me Back

By Bre Harris, Otter Tail County Master Gardener

It's mid-September, the gardening season is winding down quickly, and I, for one, am ready to start packing it all up.

The birds are fattening up on dried sunflower heads, the tomatoes are slowing down, and I've picked, watered, weeded and battled bugs. It's been another fruitful season, so putting the garden to bed is sounding pretty nice.

But there is one last planting I always look forward to every fall: garlic!

Garlic might be one of the most satisfying things I grow. You push a clove into the ground just as everything else is winding down, cover it up, and then pretty much forget about it.

Then spring finally arrives, the snow starts to disappear, and there it is: little green garlic shoots poking through the soil. Welcome back!

Garlic is basically the low-maintenance overachiever of my garden, and I love an overachiever.

Find some good garlic

Now is a great time to start looking for garlic to plant. I often find bulbs at local farmers markets, and if you don't see any, ask around. Farmers know farmers. There's a decent chance somebody knows somebody selling seed garlic.

Reputable seed companies are also a good source, but I always like to check locally first. If a nearby grower has had success with a particular variety, that's a pretty good clue that it can handle our northern growing conditions. Plus, you get the bonus of being able to ask the person who actually grew it.

My personal favorites are Music, German Extra Hardy and Korean Red, but there are plenty of varieties to experiment with. Do some research and find a few that sound right up your alley.

Varieties differ in flavor, heat, storage life and how they perform in different growing conditions. One of the first things to consider in our area is whether to grow hardneck or softneck garlic. In Zone 4 and colder, hardneck garlic is generally better suited to our cold northern winters. It also gives us one of the best bonuses of growing your own garlic: scapes. More on those in a minute.

Whatever you choose, start with healthy garlic intended for planting rather than grabbing a bulb from the grocery store. University of Minnesota Extension recommends carefully inspecting seed garlic for discoloration, streaking or other signs of disease and buying from a source that can verify it is free of garlic bloat nematode.

I know. Garlic bloat nematode sounds like something I just made up. Unfortunately, I did not.

Tuck it in for winter

Garlic is planted in Minnesota and other northern states in the fall. University of Minnesota Extension recommends planting about one to two weeks after the first killing frost. That generally means late September in northern Minnesota and early October farther south, although Minnesota weather has never seemed particularly concerned with our gardening schedules. Keep an eye on the weather rather than relying on one magic date.

Choose a sunny spot with well-drained soil. Garlic likes moisture, but it does not appreciate sitting around with wet feet.

When you're ready to plant, gently separate the bulb into individual cloves, leaving the papery skin around each one intact if possible. Plant your large, healthy cloves about six inches apart, with the pointed end facing up. Yes, pointy side up. That's important!

If you find tiny cloves tucked inside the bulb, you can plant them, but they'll generally produce smaller bulbs. I say chop those up and throw them in dinner tonight.

Once planted, another important step is mulching the bed for winter. Leaves or straw can help protect the soil and garlic from dramatic temperature swings.

Once that's done, you get to do basically nothing.

There are very few gardening chores I can accomplish by ignoring them for several months, so garlic and I get along extremely well.

And then, spring

Garlic does most of its growing in spring, and I don't think I'll ever get tired of seeing those first shoots. That little bit of welcoming green on a cold spring morning is enough to make me smile.

After months of snow, cold and staring longingly out the window at a garden that appears to have completely given up, those little green leaves feel ridiculously exciting.

As the plants grow, keep weeds under control and make sure the garlic receives consistent moisture, particularly while the bulbs are developing.

If you grow hardneck garlic, you'll eventually get that other reward I mentioned earlier: scapes. Scapes are the curly flower stalks that emerge from the center of the plant in early summer. Removing them allows the plant to put more energy toward producing a larger bulb. But whatever you do, don't throw them away!

Scapes have a wonderful mild garlic flavor. Chop them into eggs or stir-fries, make pesto with them, toss them on the grill—once you start growing garlic, scape season becomes its own little event.

And eventually comes the main event: fresh garlic.

There is something incredibly satisfying about pulling a bulb from the soil. The dirt clinging to the roots, the layers of papery wrapper and, most of all, that smell. It fills the whole garden. If you've never smelled garlic five seconds after pulling it out of the ground, grocery-store garlic has been holding out on you.

Maybe that's why I keep making room for it every year. Garlic asks for one little corner of the garden just as everything else is shutting down. You separate a bulb, tuck the cloves into cold soil, cover them up and walk away.

Then months later, when most of the garden is still deciding whether spring can be trusted, the garlic is already there. Green. Growing. Ready to go.

Welcome back.

Learn More: University of Minnesota Extension offers additional information on planting dates, soil fertility, disease prevention and growing garlic successfully in Minnesota.