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Joyce Moore's Guide to Successful Garlic Growing

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Greetings fellow Gardeners!

The following tutorial refers to garlic growing specifically, but can easily be used for most onion crops as well.

The following information is for general garlic growing that I have used for my own home garden. Of course, there are lots of specialty seeds and plants that require more specific techniques but as I am not a professional horticulturist, but a home gardener like yourselves, I will stick with what I know!

For basic garlic growing you need a few things. First of all your garlic cloves! We started out by growing garlic from garlic heads bought at the store, but then I decided to try some new and different varieties! Last year (2000) I ended up the with some German Reds left over after my fall selling on virtualseeds.com, so decided to plant them with the idea of offering them to my customers in 2001. This way, I could be assured of the freshest product possible and it allowed me to use the garden space normally left fallow all winter to good use. So, I planted in October and waited for spring.

Remember to work in some good compost and bone meal before planting your cloves. I planted mine about three inches deep or about three times the size of the clove. We have fairly mild coastal winters so not a lot of hard ground freezing until around January and then it is only for a few weeks at most. More on this subject later in the tutorial.....



Viola!

Come late spring, what to my wondering eyes to appear, but garlic sprouts!

Let's back up a little to discuss the two basic types of garlics for the home gardener. Generally speaking we are talking about hardnecks and softnecks.

HARDNECK GARLICS (See picture at top of page) are very popular because they are easy to grow in most types of soils as long as the soil is fertile and well draining. Hardnecks will store for three to six months on average so are grown for early winter usage. There are many different varieties from the German Reds that I offer my customers to Spanish Roja and more. As you can see from the titles, these garlics most often have some coloring to them such as streaks of purple, red or brown. They are valued for their high allicin content and great flavor that holds up to cooking. Hardnecks can be a little challenging when separating the cloves as they have a fair amount of "parchment" or the papery skins you have to peel away to get at the "meat". They tend to have a inner circle of large cloves with few to any smaller cloves on the outside. Hardnecks are planted in the late fall and harvested in early to mid summer.



SOFTNECK GARLICS are the ones you see in the grocery store and in garlic braids. These are normally white such as the silverskins. The variety you see in the store most likely is "Colossal" or another generic variety. Stores and their customers want the whitest garlics. Flavor is good and can be from mild to very strong. The necks are more pliable than hardneck varieties so they make good candidates for braiding. Softneck garlics advantage is that they store longer, up to nine months. They generally have numerous cloves in a head. Softnecks also are planted in the fall with later harvesting in late summer.

You will notice in this picture to the right, that this garlic has been in my refrigerator too long and has begun to sprout! Can it been used in cooking? Not likely as the cloves will feel "empty" as the plants have already used the stores to start the plants. Can the cloves be separated and planted? Sure, and garlics can be planted in the spring but generally don't do well as an annual crop. They are genetically meant to be planted in fall so they can establish roots, then they wait for spring to start growing in earnest.



PLANTING: In most parts of the country, you want to plant your cloves about six weeks before your winter freezing weather sets in. This is to allow the cloves to send down roots and get established in the soil before hard freezing weather sets in. This keeps the garlics from being forced up and out of the soil during hard freezes and thaws. As you plant your cloves, be sure to add some good quality compost and a tablespoon of bone meal to the bottom of the hole so the plants will have some excellent nutrition to draw upon. I plant mine about three times the size of the clove or around three inches below the surface. If you live in a colder climate with significant freezing, then do plant deeper to protect the cloves, and consider mulching, just like you do when you plant bulbs like tulips and daffodils. Water in the cloves and you are done till spring!

OK, spring has arrived and you anxiously watch the plot for any sign of growth.....and there they are! Now is the time to fertilize with some nitrogen based fertilizer or compost as you can see in my picture at the top right of the page. We fertilized with a home made mix of compost, bone meal, canola seed meal, dolomite lime, and potash. We also set up watering through soaker hoses so that we watered the plants, not the weeds.

The next most important chore you need to be vigilant about is weeding!



Garlics do not want to compete with other vegetation! So semi-weekly weeding with a hoe is necessary. Do not dig down in the ground around the plants or you can tear up the developing bulbs. Just a light scratching of the soil is all you need to keep the weeds at bay. I use a "hula hoe" and love it!





HARVESTING: By the first of July, I can see that my crop is getting ready to be harvested. How do I know? First of all, the weather has gotten hotter so I know that the bulbs are forming underground and secondly by observing the plants. Now the tops are starting to brown and die back, a sure sign that harvest time is near. So I stop watering about ten days to two weeks before harvesting. This is necessary so the plants can start to "hardened" the outside of the bulbs.

Mid July is here and it's time. The plants have now browned to about 60-75 percent. I gently pull on the first plant and it comes up easily! Of course, mine are planted more shallow than most of you will do so the bulb is nearer the surface. Most gardeners will need to gently



spade around the plant in order to get the bulb loosened and pulled up.



CURING AND STORAGE: Now all that is left is to "cure" the bulbs and store for usage. Curing refers to allowing the bulbs to dry out in a warm but shaded area. Don't wash your plants but let the soil dry naturally, then brush off when you are ready to store or hang. I am drying mine on a pallet so that air can circulate around the plants. As you can see by the picture, garlics need to be dried in a single layer. Drying takes from two to three weeks depending on the weather or your choice of storage area. Some people will braid them and hang for curing. What is important is that the plants have good circulation of warm, dry air so that mold and mildew

doesn't take hold. When your garlics are done curing, then clip off the top to about 1.5 inches from the bulb and you may snip back the roots. Garlics can be stored in a dark, dry, cool place such as a basement, storage room etc and used as needed. Check them periodically as some varieties do not store as long as others. Ideal storage temperatures would be in the 40's to 50's.

Don't forget to keep your biggest and best bulbs for this year's fall planting! Rotate your crops each year. Garlics are pretty much pest free but can pick up soil diseases which can devastate a crop.

Thanks for reading my tutorial on garlic growing. This tutorial is from my own personal experience so soils, growing conditions and weather may be different for your location and you may need to amend these guidelines to fit your situation. A great source for information on garlic growing is your local county extension office. Ask to speak to a Master Gardener or stop by and pick up a helpful brochure on garlic growing. Most of all, have fun in your garden!

Here is a simple homemade recipe for an effective bug spray for your garden!"

Place one peeled onion, two peeled garlic cloves and 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper, 3 cups of water and blend until smooth. Let the mixture sit overnight, then carefully strain the liquid into a spray bottle. I bet this would be effective in discouraging Fido or Fluffy from using your favorite rose bush or flower bed as a toilet! Refrigerate unused solution and discard after thirty days.

Happy Gardening!

Joyce Moore

I do not sell garlic through my website, but there are many fine seed dealers that do! Just do a quick search on your favorite search engine.

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