

MESSENGER-INQUIRER



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Growing Garlic in the Home Garden

Looking at national magazines and gardening catalogs, it seems like it's time to plant garlic. However, the best time to plant garlic in Kentucky is October through early November. It is time to start planning and securing the cloves to plant. Garlic is relatively disease and insect free and easy to grow.

Garlic is planted in the fall because it needs cool temperatures and shorter day lengths for leaf growth. When the weather is warmer and the day length increases, the leaves stop growing and the bulb begins to form. If garlic is planted in the spring in Kentucky, the amount of garlic produced will be less compared to fall planted garlic.

At this time of year, generally, garlic bulbs are purchased from catalogs. They should be disease-free for the best production potential. Disease-free cloves from garlic grown in your garden can be used if necessary.

Garlic, *Allium sativum*, is divided into two subspecies, *ophioscordon*, hardneck or top set garlic, and *sativum*, softneck garlic.

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Hardneck garlic produces flower stalks called scapes and bulbils at the top of the stalk. Due to the hard scapes, the hardneck garlic cannot be braided. Softneck garlic usually does not produce bulbils but develops larger bulbs with more cloves per bulb. Hardneck garlic cultivars usually do better in Kentucky and produce larger cloves that are easier to peel. Softneck garlic keeps longer in storage than hardneck garlic.

The cloves, which make up the mature garlic bulb, are used for propagation. Propagation from bulbils of the hardneck garlic is more difficult and requires two years to produce mature bulbs.

Elephant garlic (*Allium ampeloprasum*) is not a true garlic, but more of a pungent leek, which has a milder flavor compared to garlic. The bulb resembles garlic with very large cloves.

Planting and care of garlic is similar to onions, but garlic is more exacting in its requirements. An open, sunny location with fertile, well-drained soil that is high in organic matter is desirable. Add good air circulation and garlic is relatively carefree in this type of site. Thrips and onion maggots are insects to watch for while the bulbs are growing. Bulb rot may be a problem if the soil is not well-drained.

Plant individual cloves from a bulb, root end down and pointed end up, and cover with 2 to 3 inches of well-drained soil. Allow 6 inches between sets. They can also be planted in a raised bed which promotes good soil drainage, reduces soil compaction, and increases the ease of harvest.

Apply mulch, such as straw, over the bulbs or cloves to help provide winter protection and conserve moisture during the summer. Check the mulch to make sure it is not holding too

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much water during periods of wet, cool weather. If it is wet, then pull the mulch back to let the soil dry and warm as long as freezing temperatures are not predicted.

Fertilizer is usually applied beginning in the spring as side-dressing every two weeks until bulbs begin to form. Garlic is day length sensitive and begins to bulb around the summer solstice.

During the growing season, garlic needs 1 inch of water per week. Stop watering about two weeks before harvest. With hardneck garlic, remove any flowering stalk that forms to increase bulb size.

For using and harvesting, many gardeners enjoy eating the green shoots and leaves of garlic plants. However, cutting them continuously inhibits bulb formation. By early June, flower stalks may appear and should be cut back and discarded so the plant's energies can be directed toward root and bulb formation.

Bulbs begin to mature or ripen in mid-July and early August. When the leaves become yellow and the leaf tips turn brown and bend toward the ground, the garlic is ready to harvest. The presence of three to five wrapper leaves is the best indication of maturity. Lift the plants out of the soil, leave the leaves on, and dry the bulbs in a partly shaded storage area for about two weeks. Rain during harvest causes serious problems because wet soil stains the bulbs and can increase the possibility of decay.

After drying, the tops may be removed, braided for the softneck garlic, or tied and then hung in a cool, well-ventilated spot. Dampness invites rotting. Properly dried garlic should last for 6-7 months at 32 degrees F and 70 percent relative humidity.

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For more information, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu . Other tips for growing garlic may be found in the publication, *Home Vegetable Gardening in Kentucky*, which is available at the extension office and online at www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/id128/id128.pdf. Enjoy your garlic!

Annette's Tips:

When to prune flowering shrubs depends on the blooming period of the plant. If the shrub blooms before the end of May, then prune it after it blooms. Flowers for next year form on old wood. If it blooms after the end of May, prune the plant when it is dormant because it flowers on new wood formed the same year. Right now is not a good time to prune woody plants because we want them to go dormant and not stimulate growth with pruning. If the plants begin to grow again this fall, the stem tips will not be hardened off and will turn brown when they freeze.

Don't fertilize trees and shrubs at this time of year. Plants are slowing down and going dormant. Fertilizer makes them grow. This new growth is susceptible to cold and freezing temperatures resulting in damage to the plant.

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