

GROWING YOUR OWN GARLIC

The following article was found in an October 2011 Globe & Mail with gardening expert Mark Macdonald of the organic gardening store West Coast Seeds in Ladner explaining how to grow your own. Posted with permission on mgabc.org website.

SELECTING:

There are two types of garlic: soft-neck garlic, the shipping-friendly kind typically found in grocery stores, and the hard-neck garlic, that's commonly sold at farmers' markets, since it thrives in colder climates. It's possible to grow both types, but you may find hard-neck varieties more reliable.

Mr. Macdonald recommends a hard-neck variety called Red Russian, which he says, is tasty and easy to grow. "It's got more heat to it" he says. It may be possible to plant cloves from the organic garlic you buy at a farmers' market. But the stuff from the supermarket may not sprout, as some growers give their garlic a blast of radiation or other treatment to extend its shelf life, rendering it infertile. **For best results, buy bulbs at gardening stores specifically meant for planting.**

PLANTING:

Now (October) is the best time of year to start planting. In BC and the maritime provinces, where the weather is milder, it's possible to leave this as late as November. As a rule, though, plant before first frost.

Separate your bulb into cloves, but don't remove the papery skin. Each clove will eventually become a bulb. Plant them with pointed ends up, about 5 cm deep and 15 cm apart, in soil that has been mixed with some organic matter, such as compost or well-rotted mushroom manure.

Find a sunny spot. If you have a low, wet garden, consider building a raised bed. The cloves will need some moisture over the fall and winter, but they risk rotting in wet soil.

GROWING:

The next step is to wait. You really don't have to do very much; just keep the area free from weeds.

It's not necessary to fertilize garlic, but if you want to give your crop a boost, add fertilizer in the spring, once it begins to sprout. Use an organic, balanced fertilizer, or fertilizer that contains equal amounts of basic nutrients like 4-4-4. By around June, hard-neck garlic will begin to bloom, sending up "scapes" or flower stalks. Soft-neck varieties do not produce scapes. Cut these off to encourage the plant to focus its energy on its roots. Don't discard them, though. Scapes are delicious in pesto, salads and stir-fries.

HARVESTING:

Wait until about two-thirds of the plant has withered and yellowed before harvesting. In the Vancouver area, this generally happens around the end of July, but the best gauge of when they're ready is to ensure the plant is well withered. When the lower portion of the plant has dried up, it's a good sign the papery layers around the bulb have adequately

formed, ensuring it will last in storage.

Gently pull up the plants. If the weather is warm and dry, simply lay the uprooted plants on their side in the garden. Otherwise, bring them inside and lay them on a rack, out of direct sunlight in a well-ventilated area. Dry them for **at least two weeks**, making sure the entire plant is completely dehydrated and you see no signs of green.

CURING:

Curing ensures the protective skin around the bulbs doesn't get mouldy. Using a dry brush, clean off the dirt. If you've grown soft-neck garlic, you can braid the stems and hang it up to store. For hard-neck garlic, trim the stems down to about 10 cm. Cured properly and stored in a dry, well-ventilated place, garlic can keep for about six months. Or you can just eat it fresh out of the ground.

But save a few of the fattest bulbs for planting. "You don't want to eat the best-looking ones", Mr. Macdonald says. "That's going to ensure the best genetic traits for next year".