Garlic gets a jumpstart when planted in the fall

Who doesn’t love garlic? The pungent flavor is a great addition to many flavorful dishes. It also adds visual interest in the garden.

Garlic is sensitive to daylength and matures during the longest days of the summer. Fall planting gives it a jumpstart on the growing season and it will be one of the first things to pop up in the garden next spring.

As the plants grow, the wide, upright blades will add visual interest to the garden. Garlic doesn’t take up much space, so it easily can be added to just about any garden. If your space is limited, stick the garlic in among your herbs or perennials. Its tall slender leaves will look like they belong just about anywhere.

While garlic is easy to grow, good soil preparation is necessary in order to produce the best and biggest bulbs. They need deeply cultivated, well-drained, rich soil with a pH of 6.4 to 6.8. Add 2 inches to 3 inches of compost to the bed before planting.

Are you a gardener who prefers raised beds or berms? Heavy clay soils can cause misshapen bulbs, and a berm or raised bed with good, light soil and good drainage is ideal for planting garlic. Garlic doesn’t produce seed, so it must be planted by using sections of the garlic bulb called cloves. Now is the perfect time to plant garlic as the cooler temperatures begin to set in, but don’t put off planting for too long.

Cloves or young plants must be exposed to at least 30 days to temperatures between 32 to 50 degrees Fahrenheit to initiate bulbing. Set the cloves in clumps the way you would plant tulip bulbs, setting cloves 4 inches apart and 2 inches deep. As you plant, make sure to orient the bulb properly, setting it with the root scar or flattened tip down and the pointed tip up. Make sure the holes are deep enough so the cloves can be covered by 2 inches of soil.

Shallots are planted in the same manner, but be sure to give them a little wider spacing – about 8 inches apart. The plants will form a cluster of up to a dozen bulbs around the original bulb and these will spread out, requiring more space between plants. If the shallots you purchased are in clumps, divide the clumps into individual sets or bulbs before planting. Shallots are planted shallow, with the tips just below the soil surface. Like garlic, set the bulbs with the root scar facing downward.

Garlic and shallots will be ready for harvest in early June next year, when the lower third to half
of the leaves have turned brown and are wilted, but the upper leaves are still green. Until then, keep the plantings weeded and watered.

Next year when you harvest, hang bunches of the new garlic in a cool, well-ventilated, shady spot for three to four weeks to cure. After the leaves, roots and outer wrappers are completely dry, brush off any loose soil, trim the roots to about a quarter-inch and cut the tops back to 1 or 2 inches above the bulb before storing. Gardeners may want to save the biggest cloves to replant next year.

Oklahoma State University Extension offers more fall gardening tips on its website.

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