

The Life Cycle of Growing Garlic



When a beginning gardener asks me what they should grow in the edible garden, I often suggest garlic. It is one of the easiest things to grow and will even produce in less than ideal conditions, such as filler near other plants or in partial shade. I once had garlic come up in rocky soil and still got a good sized bulb.



In order to understand garlic, you need to know it has a 9-month life cycle spanning from October-June. I consider garlic to be the last of the spring bulbs to bloom. You plant it in the fall, the same time you plant spring bulbs like tulips or daffodils. Garlic emerges in late winter looking like thick grass, even with snow still on the ground. In its early stage, you can trim off some of the leaves to add a mild garlic flavor to salads or soups.

As it grows, I use a combination of bone meal and blood meal for fertilizer, sprinkled on the surface in early spring before the peak growth period that happens in May.

By early to mid-June, garlic forms curly stems with drop-shaped tips called scapes, which will become its flower buds. Seeing scapes appear on your garlic tells you it's about 3 weeks till harvest. To maximize the size of the garlic head, you need to cut off these scapes before they form flower heads, so that the energy goes into growing a bigger bulb instead. I always keep 2 or 3 heads intact to produce seed garlic to plant later.



Garlic scapes forming in June



Making spoon sized lumps of garlic scape puree for freezing and storage.



Seed garlic head

Do not throw away the scapes. You can chop them up and puree them in a blender with generous amounts of olive oil to produce a fine paste, like garlic-based pesto. It can be used in cooking just like garlic, giving you the flavor but without the hot garlic breath later. I scoop mine into teaspoon and tablespoon sized morsels and freeze them on a cookie sheet lined with wax paper. I then store the morsels in a Ziploc bag or other sealed food storage container. This way I have instant garlic to use for any dish I'm making, no peeling, mincing or measuring required. Also, you can mix the garlic paste with some ranch dressing and transform it into a creamy garlic salad dressing.

Once the scapes are gone, watch the bottom leaves of the garlic plant. They will start turning yellow in 2-3 weeks. When the leaves on the garlic plant are about 3/4 yellow, it's time to dig up the garlic head.



Garlic stalk dying, ready to harvest

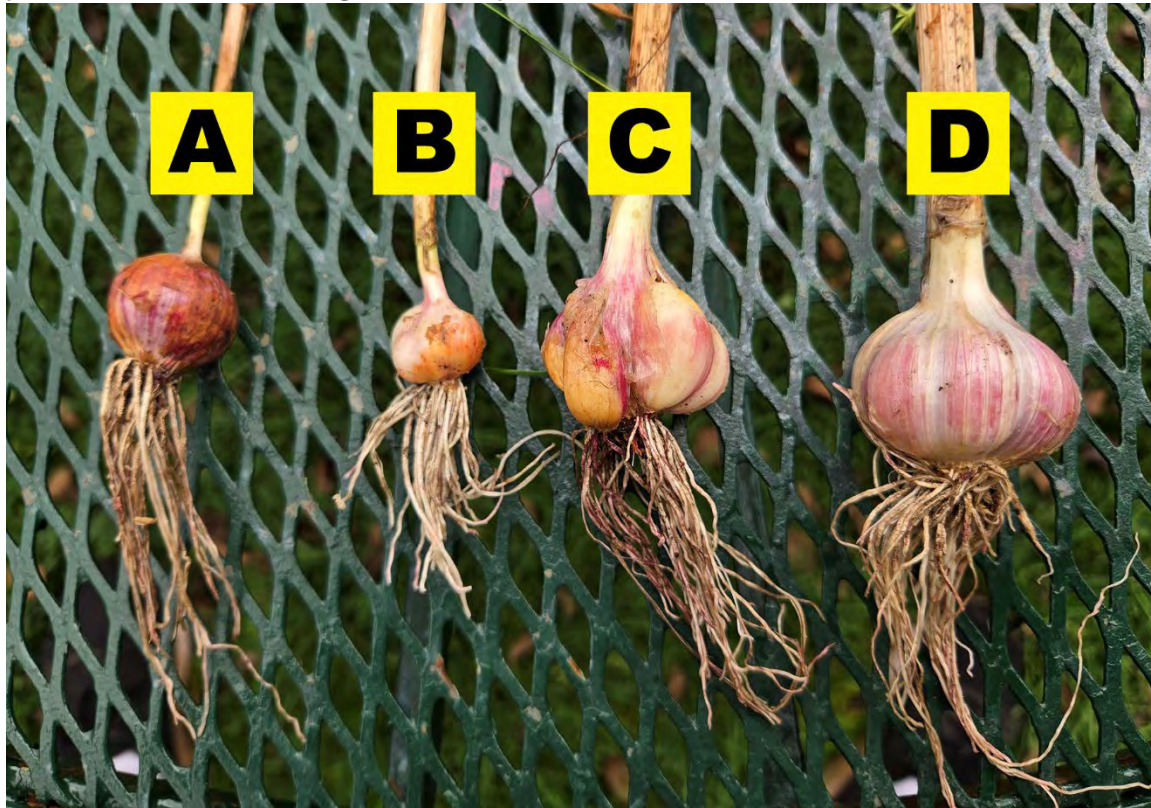


Gently remove soil around bulb and roots

When the garlic is dying above ground, it means the bulb is fully grown. Removing the bulb can be tricky since you do not want to damage the garlic head with a spade. You cannot pull them out like onions either, since the roots are more entrenched. I used a spade to cut around the outer area around the plant carefully before pulling the bulb straight out, with the soil still clinging to it. Break up the soil gently since you do not want to damage the papery covering on the bulb.

I really like digging up garlic because it is a treasure hunt, just like exploring a sandy beach with a metal detector, you never know what you'll get. You don't know how big the bulb will be until it emerges from the ground. Sometimes a slender stalk surprises you with a big fat garlic head.

When digging up garlic, these are some of the garlic-esque things you will find. So let me tell you about some of these garlic bulbs you'll find and what to do with them.



A – Round, smooth shaped head like a pearl onion. This is Year 1 garlic grown from seed garlic sown last fall. You can use it now and it's probably equal to 2-3 cloves of garlic but it is solid with no clove divisions inside. Best thing to do is put it back in the ground to pick next year as a fully formed head.

B – Small garlic head. This is fully developed with cloves inside but some are no bigger than a kernel of corn. Don't let it discourage you. When fresh, these little cloves can pack a more potent punch than bigger store-bought garlic that may have been in storage for 6 months. You can also cure them for storage. Or break up these cloves and sow in the fall for them to form larger heads next year.

C – Fully formed head but no papery skin. The garlic is good but not suited for storage since it will shrivel up when it dries. Use it now for cooking or pickling.

D – Fully formed head, skin intact. This is the ideal garlic head you want for drying and storage and could last you 9 months or longer under proper conditions.



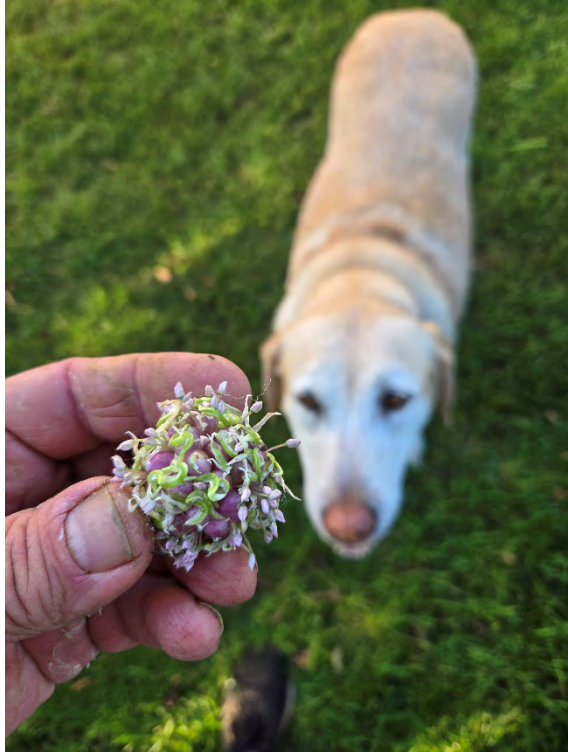
Curing garlic on a baking rack hung under a tree in the shade



Trimmed garlic, cured and ready for storage

To store the garlic for long term use, you need to cure it first. I rinse off the soil gently, not damaging the papery cover of the bulb. For curing garlic, I use a cooling rack from the oven and hang it from a tree branch. Insert garlic bulbs between the grates and knot the long leafy ends to keep them from slipping out. Hang them in partial shade, not direct sun. The rack ensures proper spacing of garlic heads for good airflow, evenly drying the garlic. Some people can weave long braids with the garlic leaves and hang them too. After hanging 1-2 weeks, the skin is dry and papery and the roots become dry and crisp. The garlic is ready to store. Trim off the roots and stems above the shoulders of the garlic head. I recommend putting the garlic in a dark, cool dry place in the basement. I use an empty but ventilated cardboard shoe box to store my garlic.

Once cured, garlic will keep 9 months or longer. By about April the following year, garlic could be sprouting or drying up inside. For me, storing 2-3 pounds of garlic is like having a year's supply. By May or June, if your old stuff has dried up or sprouted, you can dig up a premature head of garlic and use it.



As for the seed garlic, I keep the seed head clusters intact in the crisper of my refrigerator, in a sandwich bag. Peel back the skin of the seed head and it reveals popcorn kernel sized seeds inside that break apart when gently squeezing them. Each of these produces a garlic plant and will become a mature head of garlic in 2 years. I sow them in October by crushing the seed head in my hand and scattering them on the soil surface. You do not need to dig or put it in deep. Apply a thin layer of soil or even leaf mulch, enough to cover the seed garlic, so that it will come up over winter. Taking developed garlic cloves and planting them individually in October will give you a full garlic head from each next year.

I recommend sowing seed garlic in one place, separate from the 1st year garlic bulbs that have not formed cloves but lay dormant, awaiting year 2. This way you can mass harvest groups of garlic simultaneously the following year. You can allow the seed garlic to simply dry up and stay in the ground undisturbed, to return for harvesting the next year.