

GREEN SPACE

Garlic rewards abuse — plant it in time for frost

If you try to grow garlic with all the effort required to grow tomato and peppers, you'll probably fail.

Garlic is foolproof but foolish. You must totally abuse the plant to coax it. Really.

I've grown garlic for years. It's my weirdest vegetable, or is it an herb? It's more like an onion, but don't try to grow it like one.

Even the planting cycle makes no sense. Now's the time to pop a few cloves into the ground. They soon will sprout and survive anything Ma Nature throws at them. In spring, they will take off, and

by July, you'll be harvesting.

I learned the ground is crucial. Garlic grows best in average soil. The only job is to remove the rocks. It's perfectly happy in our compacted urban clay. I've seen garlic grow where even weeds will not.

When the seedlings appear, lightly mulch with ground leaves or straw. Resist the urge to fertilize.

That results in tall, healthy-looking plants. But when you dig them, you'll find very small bulbs or none. Garlic will spend the extra energy on the plant stalk and ignore bulb production.

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Garlic seed bulbs are available at some garden centers. Each bulb has about eight cloves. Plant them root end

down about twice as deep as the bulb. They grow best planted six inches apart.

Although garlic often is the only green thing in the garden, hungry creatures ignore it. They cannot stand the aroma. The plant never goes dormant in the winter. It's adding root structure

and preparing for the onslaught of bulbs in the spring.

As the soil warms, a garlic plant can add inches of height overnight. You almost can see it growing.

In late spring, hardneck garlic will send out a narrow stalk which will flower and go to seed. Cut that off as soon as you see it. You want that growing energy to go to bulb production.

The stalk, called a scape, is edible and considered a luxury. It offers a very sweet, mild garlic flavor for use anywhere you'd use the bulbs. Enjoy this taste of

things to come.

Garlic tells you when to harvest. Its leaves will bend over and begin to die off. Slip a shovel under the bulb and pop it out. A narrow trenching spade works best.

This part is important. Unroll a tarp on your drive, and sun dry the bulbs on it. It takes only a few hours. The bulbs will turn pure white. Otherwise, they will mold in storage.

Store the bulbs in net potato bags in a cool, dry place. A six-by-six-foot planting will last your family almost a year.

Then take advantage of that eight-from-one ratio.

Separate the largest bulbs for cloves to plant in the fall.

Keep the dried leaves on some bulbs. These can be woven into garlic braids which make coveted Christmas gifts.

Each season, rotate your crop on a five-year cycle. Garlic grown in the same soil can attract a white fungus that ruins the bulbs.

Lucky for us, BJ Gourmet Garlic Farm is nearby in Portage County. Check out their excellent website at: <http://bjgarlic.com>

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