



It's got to be garlic

Once you've tasted home-grown garlic, you'll want to grow some every year. This pungent bulb is revered in many nations, not only for its culinary uses but also for its medicinal properties. Curries, pesto and garlic bread all demand copious quantities, but a more subtle garlic flavouring in dressings, sauces and other condiments is just as important. Garlic needs only a little attention and stores well, so you can keep yourself supplied year-round. One garlic clove planted in the ground will produce a bulb containing 10–15 cloves – a 15-fold return is well worth the wait.

START RIGHT NOW: For me, planting garlic signifies the start of the new growing season. Gardeners in New Zealand are often advised to plant on the shortest day and harvest on the longest day. I recommend planting garlic in May or June in Wellington, and then harvesting most of your bulbs in February the following year.

WHERE TO PLANT YOUR GARLIC: Garlic likes a moist soil but doesn't need a rich one, although don't plant in an area you've used to grow other members of the onion family in the previous year. If you plant your cloves close together (8 centimetres apart in both directions), you'll get smaller bulbs but a greater total weight of garlic from a given area. You'll get bigger bulbs if you space them 15 centimetres apart but you'll need to weed more often. I plant mine about 10 centimetres apart in each direction (or nine cloves in a 30-centimetre square).

SOURCING GARLIC: You can buy garlic bulbs to sow at a garden centre or organic



Rachel Knight's garlic in October, still four months from harvest

supermarket. Don't try planting the bags of Chinese garlic on sale in supermarkets, as by law these are fumigated on importation to New Zealand. You might also find some elephant garlic at a garden centre or farmers' market: this produces huge cloves with a milder flavour.

HOW TO PLANT YOUR GARLIC: Divide your garlic bulbs into cloves only when you're ready to plant them, selecting the fattest 8–10 cloves and breaking each gently off the base. Loosen the soil well with a fork and add a sprinkling of lime if it is acidic. Plant the cloves with the pointy end upwards and the top about 5 centimetres beneath the surface of the soil.

LOOKING AFTER YOUR GROWING GARLIC: After planting, I cover the whole area with a fine mulch – usually something I've shredded in my mulcher, but straw or cocoa husks would be fine too. I usually mulch again once the tops are above the ground to avoid weeding later on. The only care garlic needs

aside from this is occasional weeding, and watering if it's very dry. Mulching reduces the need for both.

HARVEST TIME: Dig your first garlic bulb at Christmas when you're trying your first new potatoes. Lift the bulbs gently, as they may be quite deep and if you bruise them they won't keep well. I lift the majority of my garlic in February, when the tops start to turn yellow. You can enjoy your garlic 'green', straight from the ground, when it has a mild, spicy flavour, or dry the bulbs in a cool, airy place such as a shed or garage, for use throughout the year. The stems of several bulbs can be plaited together to hang them up, or cut off the tops to about five centimetres above the bulb and store in a cool, dark place. Some varieties have stems that are easier to plait than others; wet them first to make them more pliable. If you don't like to cook with garlic, a plait of bulbs makes a decorative addition to your kitchen and will, of course, keep your whole house entirely vampire-free.