

Timing the Tug: Garlic Harvesting Demystified (published 2025-06-07)
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As early summer approaches in the Tri-Cities, home gardeners are likely seeing the fruits of their labor emerging right before their eyes. A notable subterranean harvest during this time is garlic. As the weather warms up and the days get longer, your garlic plants are busy finishing their underground work and it's almost time to dig up the rewards.

Harvesting garlic isn't quite as simple as yanking it out of the ground. To get the best flavor, longest storage life, and next year's seed stock, a little care and timing go a long way. The first question most gardeners ask is, "How do I know when my garlic is ready?" The secret is in the leaves.

Garlic plants typically grow eight to ten leaves, and each leaf corresponds to a layer of skin around the bulb. As garlic matures, the lower leaves start to yellow and die back. The ideal time to harvest is when the bottom three or four leaves have browned, but the upper leaves are still green and firm. If you wait too long and all the leaves die back, the bulbs can split open underground and won't store well. If you harvest too early, the bulbs might be undersized and underdeveloped. For most folks in our region, that sweet spot tends to fall somewhere between mid-June and early July, depending on the weather.

When it comes to actually harvesting your garlic, slow and steady wins the race. It's important not to just grab and pull, or you'll risk tearing the stalk or bruising the bulb. Use a garden fork or hand trowel to loosen the soil a few inches away from the plant to give yourself a little room to work. Gently lift the whole plant out, being careful not to stab or slice the bulb. Brush off any large clumps of dirt, but don't wash the bulbs with water at this point. Garlic needs to dry before it's cleaned thoroughly.

Once you've got your harvest out of the ground, the next step is curing - basically letting the garlic dry in a well-ventilated, shaded space for two to four weeks. A covered porch, garage, or shed with good airflow is ideal. Lay the plants out in a single layer or hang them in small bunches, keeping them out of direct sunlight. This drying period allows the garlic skins to tighten, the flavors to concentrate, and the bulbs to become storage-ready. After curing, you can trim the roots and cut the stems short, or if you grew softneck garlic, try your hand at weaving the stalks into braids for a rustic storage display that's both functional and decorative.

Once cured, store garlic in a cool, dry spot with plenty of air circulation - think mesh bags, baskets, or even paper bags in a pantry. Avoid the fridge; the cold temps can trigger sprouting. Properly cured and stored, your garlic should last through the winter and well into spring, depending on the variety.

Don't forget to set aside some of your best bulbs for fall planting. Choose the biggest, healthiest heads from your harvest, and when you're ready to plant, break them into individual cloves. Each clove will grow into a whole new bulb. Store your seed garlic in the same conditions as your eating garlic, just label it so it doesn't accidentally end up in your spaghetti sauce.

After you harvest garlic, your bed might look bare, but don't let it sit idle. If you're planning to replant garlic in the fall (typically around late October), you have time for a quick summer crop. Fast growers like bush beans can pull double duty, by providing a quick vegetable harvest, and providing nitrogen to the soil. The decaying legume roots and nodules slowly release nitrogen into the soil, adding a moderate amount of nitrogen that is beneficial to early garlic root development without overfeeding.

Garlic is one of those garden staples that's easy to grow but even more satisfying when harvested right. With a little observation and patience, you'll end up with bulbs that store well, taste great, and set you up for another successful planting season. So, grab your trowel, keep an eye on those leaves, and keep "workin' th' dirt!"

Resources

"Growing Garlic in Home Gardens," <https://extension.umn.edu/vegetables/growing-garlic>

"Garlic Production for the Gardener,"

https://secure.caes.uga.edu/extension/publications/files/pdf/C%20854_8.PDF

Growing Garlic in the Home Garden," <https://yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu/how-to/growing-garlic-home-garden>

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT's YouTube site for helpful videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IklH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County's YouTube site:

<https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

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