

Plant Garlic and Grow Through Winter (published 2026-10-10)

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While most Johnson City gardeners spend late September packing away their tools and mourning the end of tomato season, a few savvy growers are just getting started for next year. Imagine a crop you can plant in autumn, walk away from during the freezing winter months, and harvest in mid-summer with almost zero effort. Garlic is the ultimate winter-growing loophole for Northeast Tennessee. While your raised beds look dead and frozen under a layer of January snow, beneath the surface, garlic cloves are quietly developing a massive root system, using the winter chill to jumpstart a huge summer harvest.

If you want to try your hand at this cold-weather magic, your first step is deciding which type of garlic fits your garden and your tastes. Garlic is divided into two primary categories: hardneck and softneck. Understanding their structural differences, climate preferences, and culinary uses is the key to a successful harvest.

Hardneck Garlic: The Cold-Weather Specialist

Hardneck garlic (*Allium sativum* var. *ophioscorodon*) is the ideal choice for the mountain climate of Northeast Tennessee. True to its name, this type produces a stiff, woody central stalk that grows upward from the bulb. In the spring, this stalk loops into a delicious, curly green stem called a “scape”. Gardeners must snap these scapes off in June so the plant directs its energy into building a bigger bulb, providing a bonus harvest that tastes like a cross between scallions and garlic.

Hardneck varieties require a prolonged period of winter cold, a process called vernalization, to split into individual cloves. Because Johnson City experiences true winters, hardnecks thrive here. In the kitchen, hardnecks are highly prized by chefs because they offer a complex, robust, and pungent flavor profile. They produce a single, neat ring of four to twelve large cloves around the central stalk, making them incredibly easy to peel. The trade-off is their storage life: hardnecks have loose, papery skins, meaning they only stay fresh for three to five months after harvest.

Softneck Garlic: The Long-Keeping Classic

Softneck garlic (*Allium sativum* var. *sativum*) is the standard variety you find in the grocery store. It does not produce a rigid central stalk; its neck remains soft and flexible because it is made entirely of overlapping leaves. Because the stems stay pliable, softneck garlic is the only type you can use to weave traditional garlic braids to hang in your kitchen.

Softnecks are native to milder climates and do not require a harsh winter freeze to develop. However, they are highly adaptable and grow perfectly well in Tennessee if planted in loose, well-drained soil. Instead of a single ring of cloves, a softneck bulb features twelve to twenty-plus asymmetric cloves tightly packed in overlapping, concentric layers like rose petals.

In terms of flavor, softnecks are much milder and more uniform than hardnecks. Their real superpower is their shelf life. Because softneck bulbs are wrapped in multiple layers of tight, paper-thin skin, they lock out air and moisture beautifully. A properly cured softneck bulb can

easily be stored for six to nine months, allowing you to eat from your backyard garden well into the following spring.

Choosing Your Variety

For Johnson City growers, the best strategy is often to plant a little of both. Plant hardnecks like "Music" or "German Extra Hardy" to enjoy gourmet, easy-to-peel garlic and spring scapes during the summer. Simultaneously, plant a softneck variety like "Inchelium Red" to braid and store for winter use. By utilizing the cold winter months, you can turn a dormant garden into a year-round food source.

Planting

Success starts with proper bed preparation and basic geometry. Work compost and a balanced fertilizer into well-drained soil before planting. Separate your garlic bulb into individual cloves right before planting, keeping the papery husk on each piece. Push each clove two inches deep into the soil with the flat root end facing down and the pointed tip pointing toward the sky. Space the cloves six inches apart in rows spaced twelve inches apart. Cover the entire bed with three inches of straw or leaf mulch to insulate the soil and suppress winter weeds.

Resources:

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

“Garlic Production,” <https://extension.psu.edu/garlic-production>

“Chapter 11- Growing Vegetables in the Tennessee Home Garden,” <https://mastergardener.tennessee.edu/chapter-11-growing-vegetables-in-the-tennessee-home-garden/>

How do I ask a question?

If you have questions for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

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