



Columbia Nursery

Growing Garlic in Northwest Montana (Zones 3–5)

A Guide from Columbia Nursery

Garlic is one of the easiest and most rewarding crops to grow in Northwest Montana. It's cold-hardy, low-maintenance, and a great addition to any backyard garden. With just a little planning, you can enjoy homegrown garlic for cooking, braiding, or even seed for next year.

Why Grow Garlic?

- Hardy in Zones 3–5
- Simple to plant, grow, and harvest
- Stores well for months
- Adds flavor and nutrition to your meals
- Can be grown even in small spaces or raised beds

Types of Garlic: Hardneck vs. Softneck vs. Elephant Garlic

Type	Best For	Notes
Hardneck Garlic	Cold climates (like Montana)	Produces a flower stalk called a scape (edible). 5–10 cloves per head. Easier to peel, shorter storage (4–6 months).
Softneck Garlic	Milder climates but grows well in MT too	No scapes, 6–18 cloves per head. Longer storage (up to 12 months). Can be braided.
Elephant Garlic	Mild garlic lovers	More closely related to leeks. Large cloves (5–7 per bulb). Mild flavor. Plant 6–8 inches apart, 4–6 inches deep.

When to Plant Garlic

Fall planting is recommended in Zones 3–5. Plant in late September to mid-October, about 4–6 weeks before the ground freezes. This gives roots time to develop before winter, producing larger bulbs.

Softneck garlic can also be planted in spring (March to early May). Expect smaller bulbs but still a useful harvest.



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How to Plant Garlic

- Choose a sunny site with well-drained soil.
- Add compost or aged manure to enrich the soil.
- Separate the cloves just before planting, keeping the skins on.
- Plant root-side down, pointy end up.
- Space cloves 4–6 inches apart in rows 12–18 inches apart.
- Plant cloves 2–3 inches deep (Elephant Garlic: 6–8 inches apart, 4–6 inches deep).
- Cover with 2–4 inches of mulch (straw, leaves, or grass clippings).

Growing & Care

- Water consistently in spring and early summer (about 1 inch per week).
- Fertilize with a high-nitrogen fertilizer every two weeks until bulb formation begins.
- Stop watering 2–3 weeks before harvest to allow bulbs to cure in the soil.
- Keep the area weed-free, especially early in the season.

Harvesting Garlic

Scapes (Hardneck Garlic)

- In June, hardneck garlic will send up curly scapes.
- Cut the scapes when they form 1–2 full loops—this redirects energy to bulb growth.
- Use scapes in pesto, stir-fries, or on the grill.

Garlic Bulbs

- Harvest when the bottom 3–4 leaves are brown but the top leaves are still green.
- Each green leaf represents one layer of bulb wrapper.
- Loosen soil with a fork and gently pull bulbs.
- Do not wash—brush off dirt and cure in a shaded, airy location for 2–3 weeks.

Curing and Storage

- After curing, trim roots and cut stalks unless braiding softneck garlic.
- Store in a cool, dry, shaded place with good airflow.
- Store garlic in mesh bags, braids, or baskets.
- Hardneck stores for 4–6 months; Softneck stores for up to 12 months.

Quick Reference: Garlic Growing Calendar (NW Montana)

Task	Timing
Plant Hardneck & Softneck Garlic (Fall)	Late Sept–Mid Oct



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Plant Softneck Garlic (Spring Option)	March–Early May
Cut Hardneck Scapes	June
Harvest Bulbs	Mid–Late July
Cure Garlic	July–August

Garlic Growing Tips

- Rotate your garlic bed yearly to prevent disease.
- Save your biggest bulbs for planting next year's crop.
- Try both hardneck and softneck varieties to enjoy different flavors and uses.

Visit Columbia Nursery

We carry a variety of garlic bulbs, compost, mulch, and planting supplies to help you succeed. Stop by for advice on garlic and other cold-hardy vegetables for Northwest Montana!