



How to Grow Chillies and Peppers

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How to Grow Garlic

From clove to harvest in a UK garden



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How to Grow Garlic in the UK

Garlic is one of those crops that makes you feel like a proper gardener for almost no effort. You push a single clove into the soil in autumn, more or less forget about it over winter, and the following summer you dig up a fat bulb of home-grown garlic that knocks the socks off anything from the supermarket. I have grown it every year for two decades in Oxfordshire, and it remains one of the most reliable, low-fuss crops in my whole garden. If you have never grown it, this is the year to start.

The thing most people get wrong is treating garlic like a plant-it-and-forget-it crop and then wondering why their bulbs come up small. Garlic is genuinely easy, but the difference between a tiny disappointing bulb and a great fat one comes down to a handful of things during the growing season: the right clove in the right soil, decent feeding and watering at the right moments, and lifting it at the right time. This guide walks through the whole growing process from clove to harvest.

For the detail on exactly when to plant in your part of the country, when to plant garlic in the UK covers the timing in full, so I will keep that side brief here and focus on the growing.

Start With the Right Garlic (Not the Supermarket Stuff)



Softneck garlic stores longer, hardneck has richer flavour and copes better with cold.

The single most important decision happens before you plant anything: what garlic you grow from. The temptation is to use a bulb from the kitchen, and while it sometimes works, I would advise against it. Supermarket garlic is often imported, grown for a warmer climate, and may carry diseases that will sit in your soil for years. It is also frequently treated to stop it sprouting, which is the opposite of what you want.

Buy proper seed garlic from a garden centre or supplier instead. It is certified disease-free and bred for UK conditions, and a single bulb splits into many cloves, each of which grows into a new bulb, so it is genuinely good value. There are two broad types worth knowing:

Softneck garlic. The type you usually see in shops. Stores well, often for the best part of a year, and is generally more reliable in the milder parts of the UK. The kind to grow if you want garlic that keeps.

Hardneck garlic. Tends to have a richer, more complex flavour and copes better with cold, so it suits colder gardens and the north. It does not store quite as long, and it produces an edible flower stalk called a scape (more on those later). My personal preference for flavour.

If you are not sure, grow a few of each and see what does best in your garden. Suppliers like Suttons and Thompson and Morgan stock a good range of UK-suitable named varieties as autumn approaches.

Preparing the Soil for Garlic

Garlic wants an open, sunny spot and, above all, free-draining soil. Like most alliums, it hates sitting in cold wet ground over winter, which causes the cloves to rot before they ever get going. This is the most common reason garlic fails in UK gardens, and it is entirely preventable.

Choose a sunny site, ideally one where you have not grown garlic, onions or leeks in the last couple of years, to avoid building up allium-specific diseases in the soil. Improve the ground with some well-rotted compost before planting, but do not overdo the rich organic matter, as too much nitrogen pushes leafy growth at the expense of the bulb. How to improve garden soil in the UK covers the approach.

If you garden on heavy clay like much of Oxfordshire, drainage is the thing to sort. Either work in plenty of grit and compost to open the soil up, or grow garlic in raised beds or pots where you control the drainage entirely. How to tell if your garden soil is clay, loam or sand covers the checks, and improving drainage in clay soil covers the work if you are on heavy ground.

How to Plant Garlic Cloves



Plant cloves pointy end up, about 5cm deep and 15cm apart, in free-draining soil

Planting garlic is genuinely simple, and getting the basics right here sets up everything that follows. Most garlic is planted in autumn (October to November) for the biggest bulbs, with a spring option for those who miss the autumn window. The detail on timing for your region is in when to plant garlic in the UK, but here is the planting method itself.

First, split the bulb into individual cloves just before planting, leaving the papery skin on each one. Use the biggest, healthiest cloves for planting and save the small inner ones for the kitchen, because bigger cloves grow bigger bulbs. Then:

Plant pointy end up. The flat end is where the roots come from, the pointed end is where the shoot grows. Getting this the right way up matters.

Plant about 5cm deep, so the tip sits a couple of centimetres below the surface. A bit deeper in light soil, slightly shallower in heavy soil.

Space cloves about 15cm apart, with around 30cm between rows. Crowded garlic produces small bulbs.

Firm the soil gently and water in only if the ground is dry. Autumn soil is usually moist enough.

That is the whole planting job. Within a few weeks you will see green shoots appear, and the plant then sits quietly through winter, with the cold actually helping it (garlic needs a period of cold to split into a proper multi-clove bulb, which is why autumn planting gives the best results).

Growing Garlic in Pots and Containers

Garlic grows perfectly well in containers, which is genuinely useful if your soil is heavy, your space is limited, or you just want to keep it away from the worst of the winter wet. It will not give you quite the bulb size of well-grown garlic in open ground, but it is reliable and easy.

Use a deep pot, at least 20cm deep, since garlic roots run down a fair way. A large pot or trough takes several cloves spaced about 15cm apart. Fill with a free-draining mix, peat-free multipurpose compost with some added grit to keep it open. Peat-free compost in the UK and the best compost for vegetables cover what to use. Plant at the same depth and spacing as in the ground.

The main thing with container garlic is not letting it sit waterlogged over winter, so stand pots somewhere they drain freely and raise them on pot feet. They also dry out faster in spring and summer, so keep an eye on watering once growth gets going. Growing vegetables in pots in the UK and the best vegetables to grow in pots cover the wider container approach, and garlic earns its place among them.

Caring for Garlic Through the Growing Season



By spring the cloves have put up strong green shoots and need weeding, feeding and watering.

This is the part most guides skip and the part that actually makes the difference between small and large bulbs. Garlic is low-maintenance, but a few well-timed jobs through spring and early summer pay off handsomely at harvest.

Weeding

Garlic hates competition. Its thin upright leaves cast almost no shade, so weeds romp away around it and steal water and nutrients. Keep the bed weed-free, especially in spring when everything is growing fast. Weed by hand or hoe shallowly, since garlic roots are near the surface and easily damaged. This one job, done regularly, probably does more for bulb size than anything else.

Feeding

Garlic benefits from a feed in spring as it puts on its main growth. A high-nitrogen feed early in the season (around February to April) boosts the leafy growth that drives bulb development, since each leaf corresponds to a layer of the bulb. A general-purpose feed or some pelleted chicken manure works well. Stop feeding nitrogen by about May, though, as late nitrogen delays bulbing and reduces storage life. Feeding vegetables properly in the UK covers the principle of feeding at the right time.

Watering

Garlic needs steady moisture through spring as the bulbs swell, so water in dry spells from spring into early summer. Then, and this is the important bit, stop watering a few weeks before harvest once the leaves start to yellow. Watering a ripening bulb encourages rot and shortens how long it stores. Dry conditions in the final weeks are exactly what you want. How often to water plants in the UK covers the wider principles.

Removing scapes (hardneck only)



Snap off the curling scapes on hardneck garlic, they are delicious and let the plant focus on the bulb.

Hardneck garlic sends up a curling flower stalk called a scape in early summer. Snap or cut these off as they appear, because leaving them lets the plant put energy into flowering instead of the bulb, giving you a smaller bulb. The bonus is that scapes are delicious, with a mild garlic flavour, and are wonderful in stir-fries, pesto, or simply sautéed. It is one of the nice secret crops of growing your own garlic that you never see in the shops.

When and How to Harvest Garlic



Cure lifted bulbs in an airy, dry spot for a few weeks before storing

Harvest timing makes a real difference to both bulb quality and how long the garlic keeps. The signs to watch for are the lower leaves turning yellow and starting to die back while the upper leaves are still green, usually around June or July depending on when you planted and where you garden. As a rough guide, when roughly half to two thirds of the leaves have yellowed, it is time.

Do not wait until all the leaves have died down, a common mistake, because the bulbs can split and start to rot in the ground, which ruins their storage life. It is better to lift slightly early than too late. Loosen the soil with a fork rather than pulling by the stem, lift the bulbs gently, and shake off the loose soil. Resist the urge to scrub them clean. For the detail on judging exact readiness and curing the bulbs for long storage, the existing when to plant garlic in the UK guide covers harvest timing and curing in depth.

In short, the freshly lifted bulbs need drying or “curing” in an airy, dry, sheltered spot for a few weeks before storing, which is what turns them from soft fresh garlic into the hard, papery bulbs that keep for months.

Elephant Garlic (A Different Beast)

Worth a quick mention because people often ask. Elephant garlic produces enormous cloves and a milder, sweeter flavour, but it is not actually a true garlic, it is more closely related to leeks. It grows in much the same way as ordinary garlic, plant the large cloves in autumn, but give it more space (about 30cm apart) because the plants are far bigger. It is fun to grow for the sheer size and the gentle flavour, though true garlic has more of a punch. If you want a talking point in the veg patch, elephant garlic delivers.

Common Garlic Growing Problems

Small bulbs. The most common complaint. Usually caused by spring planting instead of autumn, overcrowding, weed competition, poor feeding, or not removing scapes. Sort those and the bulbs grow.

Cloves rotting over winter. Waterlogged soil. Improve drainage or grow in pots and raised beds.

Bulbs splitting in the ground. Harvested too late. Lift when about half the leaves have yellowed.

Rust (orange pustules on leaves). A common allium problem in damp summers. Improve airflow with proper spacing, avoid overcrowding, and rotate crops. Mild rust late in the season does little harm, but severe early rust reduces bulb size.

White rot. A serious soil-borne fungus that rots the roots and base. There is no cure, so practise crop rotation and never plant supermarket garlic, which can introduce it. Affected soil should not grow alliums for many years.

Yellowing leaves early. Can be waterlogging, poor nutrition, or simply the natural die-back near harvest. Judge by timing and conditions.

Garlic shares the onion family's pests and diseases, so growing it well alongside the rest of your alliums helps

Common Questions About Growing Garlic

How do you grow garlic in the UK?

Plant individual cloves from a certified seed bulb, pointy end up, about 5cm deep and 15cm apart, in a sunny spot with free-draining soil. Autumn planting (October to November) gives the biggest bulbs. Keep the bed weed-free, feed in spring, water through spring as bulbs swell, then stop watering before harvest. Lift in summer when about half the leaves have yellowed.

Can you grow garlic from a supermarket bulb?

It sometimes works, but it is not recommended. Supermarket garlic is often imported, bred for warmer climates, may be treated to stop sprouting, and can carry diseases like white rot that persist in your soil for years. Buy certified seed garlic instead, which is disease-free and suited to UK conditions, and gives far more reliable results.

How deep should you plant garlic?

Plant garlic cloves about 5cm deep, so the tip sits a couple of centimetres below the surface, pointy end up. Plant slightly deeper in light sandy soil and slightly shallower in heavy soil. Space cloves around 15cm apart with 30cm between rows, as crowded garlic produces small bulbs.

Can you grow garlic in pots?

Yes, garlic grows well in containers, which is useful on heavy or wet soil. Use a pot at least 20cm deep with free-draining compost, plant cloves 15cm apart at the same depth as in the ground, and keep pots somewhere they drain freely over winter. Container garlic gives slightly smaller bulbs than open ground but is reliable and easy.

Why is my garlic growing small bulbs?

Small bulbs are usually caused by spring planting rather than autumn, overcrowding, weed competition stealing water and nutrients, insufficient feeding in spring, or leaving the flower scapes on hardneck types. Address those factors, plant in autumn, keep the bed weeded, feed in spring, and remove scapes, and the bulbs grow much larger.

How long does garlic take to grow in the UK?

Autumn-planted garlic takes around eight to nine months from planting to harvest, going in around October and being lifted the following June or July. Spring-planted garlic has a shorter season and is usually harvested in late summer, but tends to produce smaller bulbs because it misses the cold period that encourages good clove formation.

Should I remove garlic scapes?

Yes, on hardneck garlic. The curling flower stalks, called scapes, appear in early summer and should be snapped off so the plant puts its energy into the bulb rather than flowering, which gives a larger bulb. The bonus is that scapes are delicious with a mild garlic flavour, lovely in stir-fries and pesto. Softneck garlic does not usually produce scapes.

A Sensible Place to Start

If you have never grown garlic, here is the plan. In autumn, buy a bulb or two of certified seed garlic, a softneck for storing and a hardneck for flavour. Split into cloves and plant the biggest ones pointy end up, 5cm deep and 15cm apart, in a sunny, free-draining spot or a deep pot of gritty compost. Then leave it through winter. In spring, keep it weeded, give it a nitrogen feed, water in dry spells, and snap off any scapes. Stop watering as the leaves yellow, and lift the bulbs in summer when about half the foliage has gone over.

That is the entire year of growing garlic, and it rewards you with bulbs that taste of something, store for months, and cost almost nothing. After twenty years I still get a little thrill lifting that first fat bulb each summer. It is one of the most satisfying crops there is.

For exactly when to get your cloves in the ground, when to plant garlic in the UK has the regional timing and a month-by-month guide. To build a wider kitchen garden, how to grow onions in the UK covers the rest of the allium family, easy vegetables to grow in the UK covers the simplest crops to grow alongside, and gardening for beginners in the UK covers the wider first-year approach.

How to Contact the Editor

If you have comments or you know I have given wrong advice then please contact me by email at

info@yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

If you have something to contribute or have a say on allotment life, then please use my email to send your contributions.

I am going to process the magazine issue once a month, so if there are comments you would like to make they can be answered in future editions.

I would like to add that most of the articles are taken off the web and some well known gardening and allotments magazines have been read in the making of our magazine content.

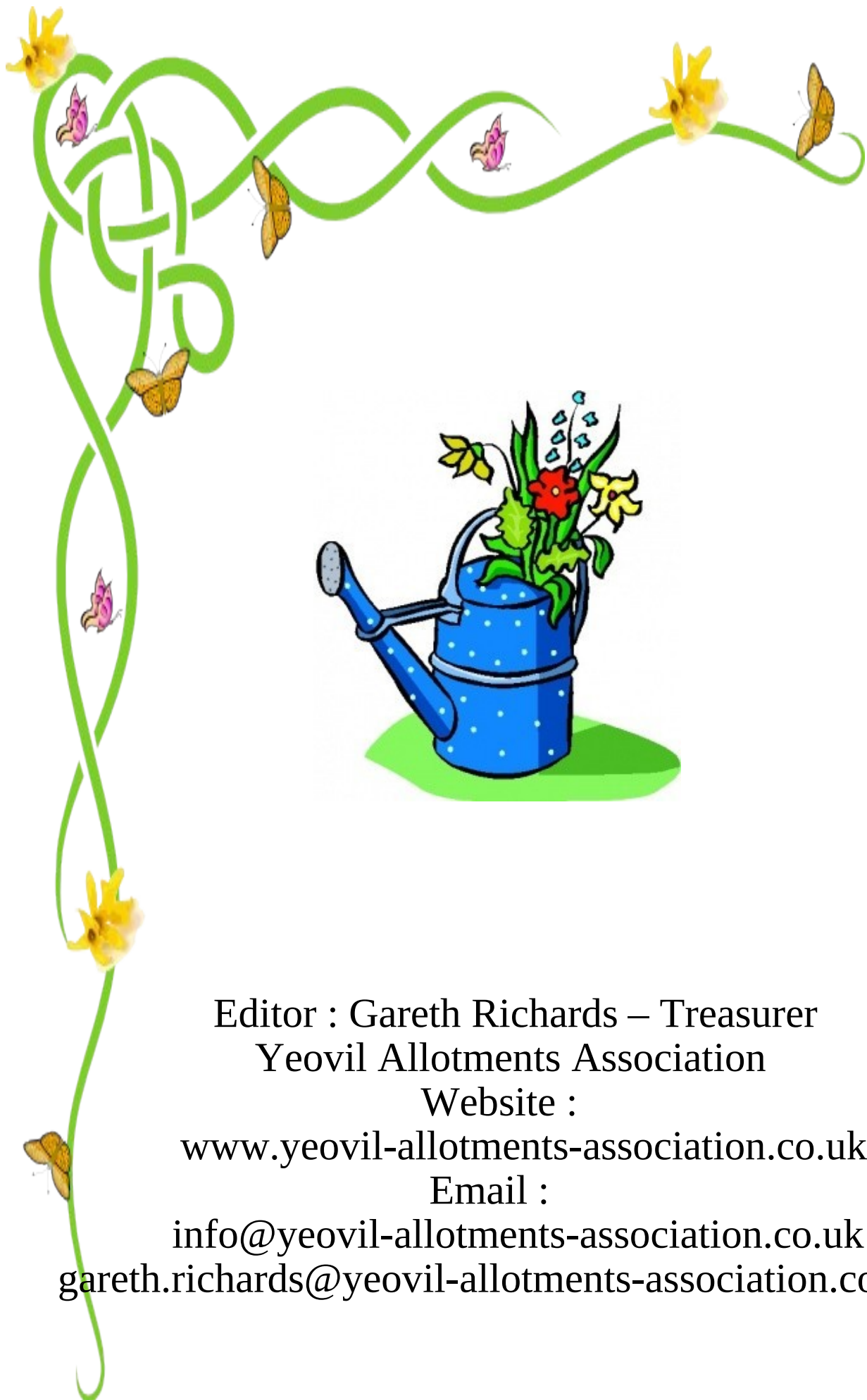
We also have our own website at :

www.yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

where you can find this magazine as well as a catalogue

Happy Allotmenting and best wishes,

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