



THE GARLIC NEWS

Connecting the Canadian Garlic Network!

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When is garlic ready to harvest?

“How can I tell if my garlic is ready to harvest?”

This is the most frequent question posed by novice growers and even experienced gardeners. Knowing the best time to lift mature bulbs is an art gained from experience.

Harvest preparations start a month ahead of the actual date that the bulbs are lifted and activity doesn't finish until two or three weeks later when the cured garlic is put away in storage. Although there is no single rule that can be applied, there are some good indicators to guide you.

First, watch the **calendar**. The magic date for harvest preparations is the summer solstice, June 21. This is when the underground bulbs start to swell and grow and when the garlic needs pre-harvest attention. On hardnecks, the scapes have to be removed to aid in bulb growth. The bulbs develop quickly over the next month or so. Irrigation is stopped during this period.

Fall planted garlic is ready to be dug somewhere between the first week of July through to mid August.

The second factor is **Varietal Group and Cultivar**. Garlic maturity in this region occurs in the following order:

Very Early: Turbans and Asiatics.

Early: Artichokes & Creoles.

Mid Season: some Porcelains and the three Purple Stripes.

Late: Porcelains and Silverskins.

The Rocamboles, having the greatest diversity, range in maturity from very early cultivars to late ones with most of the cultivars maturing in mid season.

The spread between early and late cultivars can be as much as four weeks.

Third, watch the **weather**. The growing conditions each year influence whether a harvest will be early or late. Each year is different. Dry or drought conditions favour an earlier harvest while a wet year is favourable to a longer growing period. These examples from the Beaver Pond Estates trials show how harvest dates vary from year to year:

2013: July 13 – July 26 (14 days). A wet year.

2012; June 27- July 15 (18 days). A drought year.

2009: July 12 – August 3 (15 days). A very wet year.

2008: July 13- August 1 (25 days). Late spring, wet year.

2007: July 16 – August 4 (19 days). Wet year, wet harvest.

When to dig the bulbs? Exactly when is a little tricky. Too early will give undersize bulbs that don't store well, and a few days too late will result in bulbs lacking the protective wrappers around the cloves. I've found that you have only about 3-7 days in which to harvest successfully, and with some, like the very early ones, only a day, or two. A Turban can be showing few signs of maturity and the next day, can have gone past and be broken down with few bulb wrappers left.

Next is the **appearance and behaviour** of the plants.

Hardnecks and softnecks behave quite differently.

First, hardnecks: Scapes grow on hardneck garlic. When the scape appears, the underground bulb is starting to swell. The bulbs draw their energy from the leaves, causing the leaves to die, a stage in plant life called senescing. The time worn rule is to “watch the leaves.” When the bottom three or four are dead and the top five or six are still green, its time to lift a bulb or two to check them. If they are ready, start harvesting and get them out of the ground and curing as soon as possible.

The softnecks, including the weakly bolting ones: Here you have really strange behaviour. Nearly all the Artichokes, Turbans and Asiatics, and some Silverskins will fall over when harvest is approaching. They weaken at the stem, just at soil level. Watching the leaves is not a good indicator as all leaves have gone soft when the stem weakens and they may even look pale green when the bulbs are ready. Once a number of the plants fall over, its time to lift a few bulbs and check them. As well, the Artichokes will start producing bulbils along the stem, another indicator of bulb swelling. The Asiatics are especially tricky.

Check the bulb. It should be firm and well filled out, the cloves pushing the wrappers tight. You can cut the bulb in cross-section. The cloves should be fully swelled, with distinct separations forming between them. Hardneck bulbs will show some space or separation from the scape stem. Softnecks are usually tight bundles of cloves with separation between the bundles.

Treat the harvest as your most important work in growing garlic. This is the stage at which you can do it extremely well, as a master grower, and produce top quality garlic or fail miserably and ruin an otherwise good crop.

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