

When do we plant garlic?

Tuesday, November 17, 2009

When do we plant garlic? That is a good question. September is when I like to get it in the ground, and one of my best garlic crops was planted in late August. But other jobs often push planting up until October. This year's crop just got into the field on Nov. 8th. You can plant garlic anytime in the fall. We had barely finished harvesting the squash crop when a threatening storm kept me going. It was the last of August and I broadcast a buckwheat, daikon, crimson clover cover crop as darkness fell. The day before I had gotten the garlic field composted and ready, but threw some buckwheat seed out there anyway in case I could not get to it soon. I'm glad I did. It poured that night, and it was the last night we could work the ground until November. The wettest September and October followed and the soil stayed too moist to plant. Wait, wait, wait. The garlic bulbs were shucked, meaning we broke them into cloves. Each clove makes a bulb. Only the biggest bulbs are selected for seed, and only the best looking cloves are planted.

We sort out all of the ones with bad spots. About eight bushels of cloves, numbering close to 20,000 sat in baskets as the rain replenished the ground water. The fall pastures look as good as ever, and the fall greens lacked sunshine, not water. Finally a week of no rain came and by Friday the crew was chomping at the bit to plant garlic. But I still waited. Instead, we hauled a couple hundred pounds of compost around to get new land ready for next years potato crop, and to fertilize a pasture. The garlic ground was still moist, but I did bush hog the buckwheat, which had made a beautiful cover crop. The chisel plow was pulled through the field to facilitate airflow and drying of the soil.

By Sunday the moon had entered a descending period and was in cancer, one of my favorite signs to plant in. I spaded up sixteen beds, twelve of them three hundred feet long and the others progressively shorter. Down the row we go. The beds are four feet wide with a foot wide path between them. A clove is pushed in six inches apart and six inches from the path on each side, and there is a row right down the middle. It was one happy crew, finally getting the garlic in. It took all day and we were blessed for our efforts with a beautiful sky at sunset.

The row gets raked over and then mulched with hay. I want the hay fluffed up over the beds with enough to smother weeds but to still let the garlic through. There is an art to mulching, it takes practice to get an even eight inches of loose hay distributed over a quarter acre field. In April we will pull the weeds that did poke through and re-mulch. Garlic sends up a seed stalk that we whack off in early June. Our customers like to eat these tops, calling them garlic scapes. They are like a garlicky green onion.

Garlic is harvested when the tops start turning yellow and brown. Each leaf is a wrapper around the bulb, so we don't want to wait too long before harvesting, because it stores better with good wrappers. It is sun dried for an afternoon and then laid out in a shed to further cure. The crop is usually pulled during the last weeks of June using a tractor and subsoiler to loosen the ground

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up before pulling it.

It is a relief to have it planted. All of the cover crops loved the rain and we were lucky to have got them in early. The fall hay was rained on several times and some of it we just left in the field. Other fields did not get their covers on and they had weeds instead. There is still time to plant rye and vetch, or wheat and peas, assuming it doesn't start raining again.

Early planted garlic pops up quick and makes considerable growth in the fall. But a severe winter will hurt it more than a late-planted crop. Ours will barely poke out of the ground before it stops growth for winter, and will be hardier. It may not get as big though. Anyway, we sure are glad it is in. When do you plant garlic? When you can.