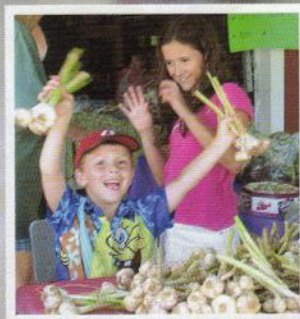


garlic THE great

by Janet Wallace



It's savoury and healthy, and well-suited to our Atlantic climate. How to grow a new traditional food



JANICE AND EDWARD BULL

Growing garlic on a family farm on the St. John River. If you remove garlic stems, or scapes, plants are said to direct more energy to the bulbs, so they'll be bigger. Bonus: scapes are good steamed.

Life without salt could be bland; life without bread might lack comfort. But life without garlic? Unthinkable. Garlic adds a pungent flavour to many foods. You might not add it to fish chowder or boiled dinner, but as a key ingredient in the diets of immigrants here from Lebanon, Portugal, Eastern Europe and elsewhere over the centuries, it's become a traditional Atlantic Canadian food. What's more, we have excellent conditions for growing the crop, resulting in large bulbs with juicy, flavourful cloves—a far cry from the dry, slightly bitter garlic sold in supermarkets.

You can buy locally grown garlic at farmers' markets and from health food stores, or you can grow it yourself. Garlic is a low maintenance plant—you can even plant it at a cottage you go to only a few times a year. It takes an hour or two to plant in fall; you cut off the tops in mid-summer and harvest a short time later.

"It's such an easy crop to grow," says Jen Melanson of SunRoot Farm, in Kennetcook, NS. "It has minimal pest problems, you can tuck it into a flower garden and it stores well. It's also convenient because planting and harvesting happen when there isn't too much other work in the garden...As the last thing you plant and the first thing that comes up in the spring, it marks the beginning and the end of the season."

Growing great garlic

In the 1980s, when Greg Wingate wanted to grow garlic on his farm near Hillsborough, NB, people told him garlic wouldn't grow in the region. He later realized people had tried to grow garlic they bought in supermarkets—bulbs from California, China and Mexico, suited to those climates but not necessarily here. "Back when I started growing garlic, Atlantic-grown garlic was almost unheard of," he says.

You can plant locally grown garlic that you buy at farmers' markets, or purchase garlic for planting from seed companies. Some of Greg's stock comes from around



Fresh garlic is juicy and flavourful. "You don't really appreciate the flavour until you eat the cloves raw," says Al Picketts, in Kensington, PEI. "Some varieties are very hot and some are mild. Some start off cool and then turn into a ball of fire in your mouth."

the world; the key is finding varieties that work well in Atlantic Canadian conditions.

Regional growers say hardneck types work better here than softneck—hardneck refers to the bulbs' scape, or flower stalk—although Al Picketts, of Kensington, PEI, grows both types. Mark Wilson of NL Organics, in St. John's, finds that German hardneck garlic works particularly well in Newfoundland's cool climate. "Everyone loves garlic, it seems," he says, "and now the island is in need of more garlic, as taste buds shift from using summer savoury to flavour food."

Planting garlic is much like planting tulips—the last two weeks of October are typically ideal. However often I've been too busy to plant then, and suddenly in mid-November or even early December, a forecast for snow sends me to the garden with a basket of garlic in hand. Even these late plantings have worked, although it's much more comfortable (and no doubt more reli-



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Plants provide green foliage from early spring to mid-summer. The stems, if left intact, offer an intriguing visual element to the garden—you can tuck garlic into a flower garden to add architectural form.

Garlic grows well in a range of soils, but prefers a well-drained soil with a neutral pH (6.5 to 7). I usually add compost to the soil before planting. Full sun is best but it will tolerate some shade.

To plant, peel off the outer layer of skin that covers the whole bulb, and pull the cloves apart. Each clove will produce a bulb; keep the skin on the individual cloves. Plant the cloves with the pointed side up (root side down) with an inch of soil covering the tops, six inches apart. I plant in raised beds or raised rows, providing better drainage and an advantage in spring—the soil dries and warms up earlier, particularly in heavy or clay soils.

The magic of mulch

One New Brunswick grower told me how one year he didn't find the time to mulch his garlic crop. That winter 10,000 of the 13,000 cloves he planted died. Ever since, his garlic has overwintered under a blanket of straw. Mulch insulates the soil from temperature fluctuations—garlic that's subjected to freeze-thaw cycles can rot or be pushed out of the ground by frost heave. In other seasons, mulch controls weeds, helps the soil retain moisture and protects it from erosion.

Straw is an ideal mulching material—it

has good insulating capacity; it usually doesn't contain weed seeds and it adds organic matter to the soil as it decomposes. A layer four to six inches deep is ideal.

Leaves can also be used but they may either blow away or mat together, thereby losing some of their insulating value. I've had success with a foot-deep layer of leaves held down (but not compressed) by thin branches spread overtop. Hay can also be used but it often contains weed seeds.

In spring, if the weather is particularly cold and wet, growers may remove the mulch to let the soil warm up, then replace it a few weeks later, after weeding. This can help reduce the chance of rot, and the extra warmth increases growth—but I also



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TURID FOASTH

5 gourmet garlic tips

1 For a quick, easy way to peel garlic, smash the clove with the side of a large knife or stone. Finding a good garlic stone is a pleasant thing to do while walking along a cobble beach; look for a stone that is smooth, dense and fits into the palm of your hand.

2 Use raw garlic in dishes such as salad dressings and marinades, tabouli and aioli. Garlic is assertive when raw—generally the finer the chop the stronger the taste...crushed garlic has the strongest taste of all; the flavour becomes milder after cooking.

3 For meals that start with sautéing onions—with spaghetti, soups and curries, for example—add garlic just before the onions are cooked. Garlic can also be tossed into stir-fries when everything else is almost cooked.

4 Al Picketts in Kensington, PEI, dries garlic in a dehydrator and then grinds it in a food processor. Using a sieve, he separates the garlic powder from the larger "garlic pearls." The pearls are also used—say sprinkled on steak before cooking.

5 For garlic that's more sweet than pungent, try roasting it—delicious spread on a baguette. Simply cut off the tip of an unpeeled bulb of garlic, brush the bulb with olive oil and roast it at 350°F for 40 minutes or so. (It's ready when soft—it oozes out when you squeeze a clove.) Sprinkle with coarse salt and a sprig of fresh rosemary before roasting.



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Hanging garlic from rafters is one way to dry it; braiding garlic stems, shown below, is usually for decorative purposes, although in olden times braided garlic was hung in rafters or on doors to ward off evil spirits.



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Harvest heyday

Harvest time ranges from mid-July to late-August. "I watch the plants and let them tell me when to harvest," says Larry Burkam of Dancing Lady Farm. At his organic farm in Bakers Settlement, NS, he usually harvests at the end of July; in Margaretsville, NS, where I farmed for several years, harvest time is usually mid-August. Plants are ready when the top two-thirds of the foliage has turned yellow, and the bulbs have a papery skin—if you pick a few of them early (for fresh eating, not for storing), you'll see how the immature skin is thick and succulent.

The ideal harvest day is a sunny day when the soil is dry, so the bulbs can be pulled out of the ground; in heavy soil they may need to be forked out. Take care not to

bruise bulbs if you're using a fork.

After harvest, the garlic needs to dry before it's stored; otherwise it will rot. Larry hangs some of the 16,000 bulbs he grows annually in bunches, but spreads out much of his harvest on racks made of old bed-springs stacked up like bunk beds. Whatever the method, the location should be out of direct sunlight and well ventilated. Barn lofts work well, or even a room with a fan.

After a few weeks brush off any dirt, cut off the tops and roots, store bulbs in a dry location, at 10 to 15°C—and you should be set to satisfy all your garlicky desires, as well as ward off vampires, at least until next harvest. 🧛‍♂️

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