



Photograph by Liz Sullivan

## About time we started using our heads

*Canadian garlic types, once shunned, are a sought-after, and scarce, autumn staple*

*by Sarah Elton on Thursday, December 2, 2010*

Like gold, you can judge the value of garlic by its weight. Rest a bulb harvested from local soil in one hand and an imported bulb in the other and you will feel that Canadian garlic weighs about double. Devotees will tell you it also tastes twice as good. But try to purchase the local stuff and you are in for a hunt. It's garlic season but already farmers are just about sold out. Demand is high, as more and more fans search out the juicy, firm cloves with a sweet smell that clings to your fingers hours after you've chopped it. Compare this to those dry, shrunken cloves with little flavour or taste, and you may understand the passion. "No one will have garlic for the winter," said Daniel Hoffmann, who grows heritage varieties of garlic from around the world on his farm in Brampton, Ont. Already the 16,000 bulbs he grew to sell are just about done.

This is a dramatic shift. Ten years ago, demand for Canadian garlic was so low farmers abandoned the crop and our garlic was on the brink of extinction. The decline began when inexpensive garlic from China flooded the market in the late 1990s. "They were selling below their transportation costs to get their garlic here," said Warren Ham, who has the wonderful title of "anti-dumping director" of the Garlic Growers Association of Ontario. His organization went to the Canadian International Trade Tribunal to complain, but, he said, the duty instituted to prevent the practice was rarely enforced by the Canadian Border Services Agency. In Ontario, where

much of the country's garlic is grown, there were 4,500 acres of garlic in 2000; in two years this had dropped to 300.

Garlic isn't like other food crops because it doesn't propagate by seed. Rather, each clove you put in the soil becomes a bulb. And you must plant garlic cloves every year to preserve the genetic stock. Without farmers raising garlic, there was less garlic each year. Garlic "collectors" and seed savers across the country were dismayed by the potential loss of genetic diversity and kept on planting. A small NGO, Seeds of Diversity, founded the Great Canadian Garlic Collection to preserve the dozens of varieties suited to our diverse growing conditions. Volunteers raise the varieties in their gardens to create a living garlic archive, with names that allude to the history of the plants people brought with them when they migrated to Canada: Baba Franchuk's, Persian Star, China Rose.

It's these global varieties that today's aficionados are searching for. "People are paying a premium for the fun factor," said Hoffmann, who offers over a dozen global varieties including Northern Quebec and Tibetan. "Ukrainian is hot and spicy, Yugoslavian is mild and sweet, Korean is medium and Russian is best," he said, explaining that he likes the giant Russian garlic cloves because you only need one for your entire meal.

"Different varieties can alter the taste of the recipe," said Jackie Rowe, owner of The Garlic Box, a company specializing in a range of local products, from seed garlic to pickled garlic. An heirloom Italian, she said, has a vibrant green flavour that is good in salad dressing, whereas the variety called Music lends itself well to roasting because of its deep, rich taste.

To ensure a steady supply of local garlic, fans must belong to a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) plan, or locate a grower at the farmers' market who hasn't pre-sold their entire stock. (Farmers also hold back their best garlic to plant for the next season. If they want to grow more garlic, they need to hold back even more.) The reason you can't buy local garlic at the supermarket, explained Ham, who grows 15 acres of organic garlic and runs a CSA, is that supermarkets want to purchase garlic at a lower price and due to its popularity, farmers have options. "We can do better outside of the chains," he said.

Happily, more farmers are getting into the trade. Sonia Stairs of Boundary Farm in Midway, B.C., sells her heritage varieties to other growers, including farmers who are entering the market, and has had to put a 50-bulb limit on what she will sell to one grower. She thinks interest in the plant goes beyond sales. "It's fun," she said. "I haven't met anybody yet who doesn't start to smile when you say you grow garlic."