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Pass the garlic, bud

Local growers still recovering from Chinese invasion of 2001

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There's an easy trick to determine the age of a garlic bulb in a grocery store, says Ontario farmer Mark Wales.

Toss it in the air.

The longer it takes to land, the lighter and older the garlic.

The hard part is trying to find garlic that hasn't journeyed over 10,000 kilometres to that local grocery store.

Wales, an Alymer-area farmer who switched from tobacco to pick-your-own garlic, fruit and veggies, says Ontario garlic producers are slowly rebuilding from the catastrophic year of 2001 when China began dumping garlic into the province for the wholesale price of 40 cents for just under half of a kilogram.

What was once thought to be a possible alternative crop for struggling tobacco farmers suddenly wasn't worth the cost of harvesting, and some Ontarians literally lost the farm, he said.

"Currently, the crop's probably around 500 acres in Ontario," Wales said. "We were over 4,000 acres in 2001.



Jackie Rowe at The Garlic Box.

They hammered it back to the stone age."

Wales, president of the Garlic Growers Association of Ontario, said his organization's website lists some stores where fresh local garlic is available in season — from mid-July to August — but people usually have to sniff it out at farmer's markets and garlic festivals.

Stored properly, Ontario garlic will last up to six months or longer, Wales said.

The federal and provincial governments could take more steps to help out farmers — making

sure that the signs over produce in grocery stores properly identifies the source and type of food, enforcing tariffs and amending rules around food processing labelling, he said.

But the future of the Ontario garlic market lies in the hands of the savvy consumer, garlic growers say.

Jackie Rowe, of The Garlic Box, in Hensall, near London, said the 'buy local' trend is driving up interest in homegrown bulbs.