

# High School Teachers Started Garlic-Growing Operation

By Dee Goerge, Contributing Editor

When you purchase gourmet garlic from Tamarack Garlic Farm, you get a few bonus benefits. First of all it's grown in the U.S., unlike the majority of the garlic on the market. Second, you have options from mild to hot varieties that you likely never knew were available. And finally, you get a healthy dose of education from the growers, who are growing garlic during summer vacation.

In its first year, Tamarack Garlic Farm produced 3,400 lbs. of 11 varieties of garlic on 3/4 of an acre on Dan Lilla's parents' cropland. Lilla's in-laws suggested garlic as a potential crop to Lilla, a technology education teacher, who mentioned it to fellow teacher and friend Jason Hovell, an agricultural science teacher and FFA advisor. The educators did their homework. They chose the best varieties to grow in Wisconsin, found equipment and researched the process of growing, harvesting and drying garlic. On paper, it seemed to be an ideal crop.

"Both of us like garlic, and the timing works with our schedule," Lilla says. "It stores well. It's a product you can put in a box and ship with no refrigeration, making it ideal for online sales."

Hovell, who has a variety of projects at his high school from aquaculture to an orchard growing food for the hot lunch program, was eager to start some kind of farm venture, as well. Garlic seemed like a sustainable choice.

"The major vegetable producers at the local roadside stand in the area grew everything except garlic. They were happy to find out we were eager to grow it, and they sell it at their stand. A few other market growers sell garlic at local farmers markets, but I think we stand out with our unique varieties. And people are into healthy and natural foods," Hovell says, noting that garlic is considered among the top "superfoods."

They purchased 2 pieces of specialty equipment from Buckeye Tractor Co. in Columbus Grove, Ohio - a 2-row "water wheel" planter and a raised bed shaper to aid in the process.

Since garlic doesn't like too much moisture, they planted the cloves in raised beds (2 rows in 4-ft. wide beds 6 in. apart) for better drainage in the silty loam soil.

A "second insurance policy" Hovell and Lilla took out was buying the cheapest vodka they could find. With an investment of 425 lbs. of garlic seedstock at \$15/lb., they wanted to make sure they weren't planting bad bacteria or microorganisms. So they soaked the cloves in vodka and then doused them in a mixture of fish emulsion and mycorrhizal fungi to jumpstart the roots before winter set in.

Planting time is early October, about six or seven weeks before the ground freezes. Hovell and Lilla sat on the back of the planter and slipped the cloves into the divots in the soil created by the planter. Covered with soil and straw mulch, the garlic is put to bed for the winter, while Lilla and Hovell focus on their main job

as teachers.

For their first crop, they removed much of the mulch in early spring. They modified the toolbar of the bed shaper to use as a cultivator and went over the crop three times to keep the weeds down. Plus they hand-weeded and hoed three times around individual plants.

For their second season, they plan to leave the mulch in place longer to hopefully suppress weeds, Hovell says. Plus, they planted the cloves farther apart, about 6 in., for bigger bulbs and to make hoeing easier.

Other than testing for bloat nematode, the only "pest" issue they found while monitoring their crop was pocket gophers that rearranged cloves in one area of the field. The majority of those cloves grew, however, as the gophers didn't care for garlic.

By spring the first harvest was ready. The stalks of hardneck garlic varieties grow scapes, the flower of the plant, which have a mild garlic flavor and can be eaten like asparagus. Hovell and Lilla harvested about 1,000 lbs. of scapes and educated farmers market customers how to cook them.

Between July 3-10, the business partners and their families and friends harvested the garlic by hand. It was easy to pull after modifying the bed shaper with a cutter bar that ran under the roots to loosen the plants. The garlic was bundled and hung in the rafters of an old hay barn to dry for about a month. The final cleaning and preparing the garlic for shipment was also labor intensive, Hovell adds.

"It was a little more work than we envisioned, but we had the mindset that we would work hard for short periods of time," Lilla says.

They were satisfied with the yield and sold out by the end of the year with mostly online and word of mouth sales. Customers ranged from foodies to health conscious consumers to people who just wanted a quality U.S. grown product.

They sold 10 varieties of hardneck garlic, which are considered to be gourmet and more flavorful. The hottest ones such as Georgian Fire and Metechi have the highest levels of allicin, which is associated with improving blood pressure, cholesterol levels and joint health. Hovell says he eats a clove of Bogatyr garlic daily to alleviate symptoms of Lyme disease. Tamarack Garlic Farm also grows New York (Polish) White, a softneck variety, which can be braided for decoration.

With 28,000 cloves planted last fall, Hovell and Lilla look forward to another good season of garlic. They'll be taking pre-orders online starting around April 1. Garlic bulbs range from 1 1/2 in. to more than 3 in. in dia. and range in price from \$10 to \$16/lb.

Visitors to the website will find a bonus. As educators, Lilla and Hovell can't pass up an opportunity to share information and lessons they learned to help other farmers and home gardeners successfully grow garlic.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup. Tamarack Garlic Farm, LLC, N12293 Schubert Rd., Trempealeau, Wis. 54661 (ph 608 534-0023 (Dan) or 608 534-0024 (Jason); www.tamarackgarlicfarm.com; tamarackgarlicfarm@gmail.com).



Fellow teachers Dan Lilla and friend Jason Hovell recently started a successful garlic-growing operation. They sit on back of a 2-row "water wheel" planter and slip cloves into divots in the soil created by the planter.



Cloves are planted in raised 4-ft. wide beds in paired rows spaced 6 in. apart.



Planting time is early October, about 6 weeks before the ground freezes. They produced 3,400 lbs. of 11 varieties of garlic their first year.



Harvested garlic is bundled and hung in the rafters of an old hay barn to dry for about a month.