

Planting garlic at the cusp of the seasons

All hands join in to get 40,000 pungent cloves into the ground.

by [Terra Brockman](#) in the [December 21, 2016](#) issue



Braids of soft-neck garlic. Photo by Terra Brockman.

Heads bent to the task at hand, my brother Henry and his farmhands, interns, and their families kneel in the soft soil and breathe in both the yeasty aromas rising up from the freshly tilled earth and the sweet woody smells descending from the forests surrounding the field. They also breathe in pungent garlic of many varieties, including German Extra Hardy, New York White, Korean Red Hot, Georgia Crystal, and Italian, German, French, and Russian Reds.

Garlic planting takes place at the cusp of the seasons—ideally, just after the warmth of Indian summer fades, and just before the snow flies. In central Illinois, that usually means the first week of November, on a day when the soil is dry enough to work, and when all hands join in to get some 40,000 cloves of garlic into the ground. That day marks a caesura, a break in the normal rhythms of autumn on our diverse organic vegetable farm. Those rhythms usually include frenetic scrambling to get all the greens and roots harvested for the final markets even as each day gives us fewer minutes of sunlight than the one before.

This year there have been quite a few autumn rains, and one nearly disastrous flooding of the stream that runs along the fertile bottomland field, so Henry watches the weather each day, and checks the condition of the soil in the part of the field set aside for next year's garlic patch. He does this by grabbing a harvest knife and jabbing three or four inches into the soil near the west side of the field where the sun has been hitting the longest. Then he picks up a handful of loosened earth and crumbles it through his fingers, feeling for stickiness.

When it falls apart easily, he moves to the center of the field and uses the knife to loosen more soil. He rubs a handful between his palms to see if it will form a ball that breaks apart easily. When it does, he moves on to the east side of the field where the sun has just started to warm and dry the soil. He needs to be sure that working the moist soil here and elsewhere will not turn it into lumpy mud, which would then turn hard as rock when dry, so he loosens yet another patch of earth with the knife, and makes it into a ball between his palms. Then he opens his palms. When the ball holds for just a moment before crumbling back to earth, Henry swipes his hands along his thighs with satisfaction and tells the farmhands and interns that today is the day for garlic planting.

The task is a choreographed team effort. First Henry rough-tills the beds to open them up and let more moisture escape. Meanwhile, the interns take the old pickup

to the barn where garlic from the July harvest has been hanging to cure. Each strand of garlic consists of five bunches, and each bunch has 20 garlic plants. Each bunch is tied to another bunch so that they cascade down in vertical curtains of repeating garlic.

To begin the process, one person scrambles up the rickety ladder to cut a strand loose while another person waits below to gently lower the long, heavy strand of 100 garlic heads to the ground, and then into the bed of the waiting truck. When the truck bed is full, the workers drive the load of garlic down to the field. It's a bookend moment, equal and opposite to the moment when the garlic made its early summer trip from field to truck to rafters.

Soon we will break these 3,000 heads of garlic into some 40,000 individual cloves. And except for the very small cloves and any that may have gotten moldy over the humid summer, each clove will go into the ground to become a full head of garlic for next year's garlic crop.

Down in the field, Henry has been tilling each bed four inches deep. He attaches three clamps to the back of the tiller and lets it draw three straight lines over the smooth bed to guide us in our planting. As soon as the truck reaches the field, everyone grabs a strand and walks down a row, laying garlic stems every few feet so that one will always be within easy reach. We then fall to our knees, breaking apart bulbs and plunging each clove an inch down into the yielding earth, blunt end down and pointy end up.

Normally Henry waits for the first week of November so that a late October warm spell won't encourage the garlic to send up its green shoots only to be killed off by the winter cold. This year, however, we've had unseasonable warmth clear into November. Even as each day shortened, and the angle of the sun's rays fell lower in the southern sky, the temperatures still rose to the 60s and 70s, creating cognitive dissonance.

While Henry would have liked to wait for cooler weather, another rain is sure to come before then, and our window of opportunity will close. So while the unseasonable warmth makes things a bit dicey for the garlic, it's a perfect day to include the children of the two interns who have spent this season with us. Their presence accentuates the moment when one season meets another, as the last of this year's crops come out of the ground, and the first of next year's crops goes in.

And if you squint slightly and look from a distance, you see that the generations present in the field—my brother in his fifties, his twenty- and thirtysomething interns, and their young children—are seasons too, meeting for a moment when some are cycling in and others cycling out.

Back in the present, minute after minute, hour after hour, the repetitive actions become automatic—reaching for a head, breaking it apart, placing each clove into the ground five inches from the previous one. As the afternoon sun warms the field and us, layers of clothing are shed—first jackets, then sweatshirts, then long-sleeved shirts—and suddenly we are in short sleeves for the last time this season.

In five-inch increments we move down one long bed and up the next, planting row after row, working our way through the different varieties of garlic. Most of the garlic heads are tightly wrapped with layers of paper skin strong as super glue. Every so often you hear a grunt of effort as someone breaks open yet another head. When my dad helped us plant garlic, he used a screwdriver to help his arthritic hands do the task, wedging the tool into the center of each head to force the cloves apart.

Then the sun begins to sink toward the lip of the hill at the western edge of the natural bowl that cradles our fields. Chill air rolls down the hillside, seeping into the soil and into our skin and bones. Layers of clothing slowly go back on as the team finishes the last tilled bed. The horizon suddenly gulps the sun, but a tangerine glow lingers in the sky as workers young and old make their way home, smelling of freshly tilled soil and freshly planted garlic.

With just the barest light still hanging in the sky, I look back to see the white confetti of garlic husks and stems scattered over the black earth. The first crop of the next season is in the ground, and to celebrate, the earth is decked out for the evening in black tuxedo and white tie.

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