

Poor Chinese crop, local Canadian demand spurs garlic prices

By Karen Davidson

At one dollar per bulb, garlic is this season's golden crop. The buy-local movement has shone a light on the cook's clove with the result that consumers are now demanding the fresh, pungent ingredient over dry Chinese imports. With only 3,000 acres grown in Ontario, growers are in the enviable position of charging seven dollars per pound, up from five dollars last year.

The jump in prices is largely due to garlic shortages in China, the globe's primary supplier dominating 77 per cent of the market. Bad weather hindered its July harvest in Jinxiang county in northern Shandong province – a place the Chinese call the Wall Street of garlic. The tripling of prices there has translated into garlic as the most valuable commodity in the country in the last year according to *The Guardian*. The gold rush is expected to cool as weather returns to normal and hoarders release their garlic caches.

With imports priced sharply higher, the local 2010 garlic crop is commanding a premium at festivals and the farmgate.

"For the last five years, you could sell everything and more," says Alan Cowan, secretary-treasurer of Garlic Growers of Ontario. "I'll likely sell about 6,000 pounds for seed stock this year."

That's a profitable crop from five acres of the hard neck Music variety grown on his heavy loamy soil just west of Owen Sound. However, it's not easy money considering the custom-made equipment for planting at a precision depth of four inches or the hand-labour required for harvesting and cracking the bulbs for seed.

The shortage of new-crop garlic has put pressure on seed stock which is planted in October for harvest in July 2011.

At the Superior Plant Upgrading and Distribution (SPUD) unit in New Liskeard, Becky Hughes is supervising techniques to produce virus-tested Music garlic in the lab and greenhouse. "This past summer, we produced more than 8,000 'clean seed' garlic bulbs which will be planted by garlic growers across the province this fall," says Hughes.

Normally, Music garlic produces a bulb with six to eight cloves, but the bulbs produced from tissue-cultured plants have only one clove. To make 'clean seed' production more economical from these single-clove bulbs, John Zandstra at the Ridgetown campus and Hughes are investigating the production and use of bulbils.

These are produced in the scape or flower structure. Normally scapes are removed from garlic plants, but these can be a source of 10 to 50 or more bulbils which can be used for propagation. This research is currently underway in the field in Ridgetown and in the greenhouse in New Liskeard.

Photo cutline: Alan Cowan hand plants some cloves at his Arranhill Garlic Farm near Allenford, Ontario to ensure straight stems that will be easier to braid at harvest. Some customers like the rustic look of garlic hanging in their kitchens.

Source – The Grower 2010 (www.thegrower.org)