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AGFEST Special Newsletter

Last time we looked at bulbing onions, this month we look at garlic, shallots and leeks for the home gardener. These are probably the easiest of the onion family to grow.

Garlic comes in all shapes and sizes. A few years ago I saw a small ad in a rural newspaper that offered several types of garlic for sale. I purchased 12 named varieties of garlic: They were Bresencon 7340, Yabroudi, Fino de Chinko Ajofrin, Americky Maly, Pershawar white, Belarus, Manuel Benitee.

All had descriptions of their type and countries of origin. Dolovsky, rocambole, creole, and kisswani had already sold out. I grew them all that year and had enough to sell of each in the following Autumn.

It was then that I realised why we can only find a few often unnamed cultivars in the shops. Some were fiddly to peel, others were tiny and impractical to use in cooking, others had tough skins you would break your nails on, and others did not keep well.

Having said that the bulb shape, size and taste of each cultivar was unique and superb and I regret not keeping them all.



I did exactly what growers do and selected the one cultivar that the home gardener could keep for long periods, would have many uniform large cloves, easy to peel and tastes good. This was Americky maly. It may have some Bresencon 7340 in it, but we selected Americky maly as best as we could from the source and that is what it was named when I purchased it.

The difficulty with all heirlooms is verifying that it is the original. Purists and professionals debate origin and provenance seriously. The students at St Georges

School at the Ravenswood Community Garden have been growing this for sale at Inspirations for the last four years.

Growing garlic.

Garlic hates competition so start with a weed free well cultivated bed, rake in Complete Organic Fertilizer (COF), 2lt per 5 metre squared. It grows well in clay loams, sandy or silty soils; I know that because I have lived in regions that have had all three, the important thing is good drainage and I would recommend raised beds.

Sow about 20cm apart and 30cm in the row, it is incredibly easy to hoe the top off your garlic if planted too close, the bulbs will not get big when planted too close.

Do not mulch as wet mulch will rot the bulbs.

Plant the individual cloves pointy end up to the same depth as the clove, people worry about this they think it will rot off but deeper is better than too shallow. You can plant any time from early autumn to end June, earlier sowings are better because you get bigger bulbs.

Some varieties do have specific sowing dates so you may need to check your sowing date and record how large the bulbs were when harvested later in the summer and readjust the sowing date if the final bulbs were small.

If there is little rain over Winter to early spring, irrigate but do not over water, garlic is a tough plant, look at the last newsletter to see where it comes from.

In late spring when the leaves are about 35cm tall I feed each plant with a small sprinkling of COF, the leafy plants now have small bulbs which grow quickly from mid to late Summer into large bulbs.

Harvesting is the hardest bit. If we get a wet late spring and summer, the bulbs can rot so timing of harvest is crucial. The tops do not have to die down, fall over, or form a flower, you go by the size of the bulb and the yellowing of the top leaves.

They are usually ready to pull in December/January with the leaves attached. This is because the nutrients from the leaves still go into the bulb. Line them all out in rows in a dry shed on a tarpaulin or newspaper or hessian, and wait until the tops whither, after a couple of weeks break off one of the tops from the bulb if it comes away easily they are ready for stringing.

You can then store the onions in a cool dry place. Garlic can keep for a whole year.

The worst place to keep them is in the kitchen near the sink or stove where moisture from boiling can rot the bulbs.

Shallots and potato onions.



There are brown and red shallots, white pickling onions and potato onions; shallots are generally round or elliptical bulbs which grow in multiple clusters above the soil.

The harvested clusters of bulbs have some bulbs which split into two or three or there may be round ones too, potato onions are slightly different with a ring of round pickling onions beneath the soil,

purists say potato onions are hard to source, older gardeners had their own selections which may now be lost.

Shallots are not planted deep, they are put into the ground pointy end up with the top just above the surface, too deep and they will rot. Plant about 20cm apart, 30cm in the row. After about three weeks they start to show a green shoot.

White pickling onions do not keep as well as brown or red shallots, the best of them all is the red shallot. It takes some waterlogging and always multiplies easily, this is the one I would grow.

Brown shallots seem to be better sown late Winter or even early Spring, so the risk of rotting is less; they very rarely flower prematurely. Harvest from late November until January, if it looks like we may get wet weather in summer it is wise to lift them earlier otherwise they will rot in the ground.

Dry them outside in the hot sun not in a dry shed, the moist bulbs will not dry and one rotten bulb will spread very quickly to the whole lot, if it is a very wet Summer then split the bulbs and line them out in the warmest room you have and turn them over each day removing any rotting ones.

This year at Inspirations we are selling garlic and red shallots.

We will be at AGFEST site number 1034b in Tenth Avenue from 1st to 3rd May 2014, where we will be selling these as well.

If you bring a copy of this newsletter to our shop in Exeter or our stall at AGFEST we will give you a FREE packet of merida carrot seeds which we will have at the till, each packet contains approximately 1,000 seeds.



Leeks.



There are several cultivars some have light green soft foliage best grown in warmer regions (Bulgaarse reuzen and Danish types among others) some have dark green foliage which can withstand hard frosty weather (Blauwgroene Herfst and Giant Winter types among others).

Some have long white shanks, others have thick stumpy shanks some taste sweet others have been bred for that strong leek flavour, good soil nutrition with complete organic fertilizer will enhance flavour and nutritional value. Leeks have long 'pseudostems'.

Most growers now grow hybrid leeks which are very uniform in size and growth rate. Open pollinated varieties can be excellent as long as the selections have been skilfully done, if not you will end up with some small spring onion like leeks, some flowering, some with bulbous bases and some large stumpy ones in the same seed batch.

Sowing leeks.

Leek seed is not long lived it can last in good storage for two or maybe three years before germination rate drops quickly.



Sow early spring to achieve large leeks in Autumn and Winter and another sowing in early mid- summer they need good drainage so raised beds are recommended they are best sown at these dates because the soil is warmer to aid germination.

Sow seeds in small trenches about 5mm deep, sprinkle COF in this trench and lightly cover with fine soil or potting mix. Irrigate lightly because the seed must not dry out, leeks have to form a strong fibrous root system which takes time, if they dry out they will shrivel up.

When they are about pencil thickness transplant them to 25cm apart and 30cm in the row in little holes so that only about 5cm of top is showing. Water them in.

You can buy punnets of leeks throughout the year but instead of transplanting each small leek and risk it drying out or getting overwatered I plant them in little bunches and when they are strong pencil thick plants I then transplant them individually. Leeks like heavy loam but can be grown in most soil types.

It is important to use complete organic fertilizer to get the best eating quality. The leeks can be earthed up throughout the growing season but only to the first leaf joint or soil will get into the leaf structure at harvest.

If sown in autumn or early Winter leeks will still grow but may not get very large until the weather warms and day length increases in Spring, they should not bolt but it is possible, they taste like excellent spring onions. Leeks can stay in the ground until ready to harvest, In France in the 1800s they were called the poor man's onion.

Varieties.

We are currently growing a ten week leek at Cressy, see *February 2104 newsletter*, but this is still in the trial stage.

The seed we currently sell is a very uniform dark leaved Dutch hybrid with large white shanks of superb eating quality.

At Inspirations we sell leek seeds, punnets grown by St Georges School, and bundles of leeks grown by St Georges School in late November to December.

We will have the seeds at our site 1034b in Tenth Avenue at AGFEST this year. We will be there from 1st to 3rd May.

A subscriber asked me *"how do we know when harvested seed is ready to store?"*

This is a good question. Most seed needs a moisture content of less than 9% before storage, otherwise it could rot.

As a general rule if you can push your fingernail into the seed or bend it, it is too early to store. If the seed coat is very hard or the seed is brittle and snaps it is probably ready to store, if unsure leave in a paper bag in a cool dry place for at least two months this will not damage the longevity of the seed.

Moisture metres are very expensive but vital for the big seed companies, for the home gardener experience is more important.

Look forward to seeing you at **AGFEST**.

Happy gardening wherever you may be.

