



Fran Collin

The ^{not so} Simple Life

Seasons on a Small Organic Farm

Story and photos By Keith Stewart

I'd been on the lookout for a couple of weeks when I finally spied them. It was a clear, cold day at the end of March, and the first dozen tiny shoots of garlic were poking up through a thick layer of mulch. They were a welcome and reassuring sight. A week later, following a day or two of

gentle rain, there were several hundred. By the 1st of May, at least 60,000 garlic plants could be seen growing in three different fields on our farm. Most of them were already six to eight inches tall and looked vibrant and healthy; they held the promise of a bountiful harvest.



Field of garlic

On our certified organic farm in Orange County, we grow at least a hundred varieties of vegetables and herbs, but garlic is our signature crop. We grow

real estate consulting firm. Much of my time was spent on the phone or struggling with columns of data on a computer. It wasn't what I wanted to be doing

satisfaction than catering to corporate clients. I began to think seriously about a major life change. Before long, I quit my job and set out to become a farmer, or

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more garlic than anything else. It is the crop that brings the most customers to our farmers' market stand in New York City and has garnered a fair amount of publicity for us over the many years we've been growing it. It is also a crop for which I have much admiration and affection. Garlic's exceptional culinary and medicinal properties, its ancient lineage (it's been cultivated and used by humans for 10,000 years or more, yet still retains a wild streak), and its sturdy, upright demeanor in the field, all speak well for this impressive plant.

I wasn't always a grower of garlic, or even a farmer, for that matter. Twenty-three years ago, I was living in a small Manhattan apartment and working for a

with my life, but somehow it was where I ended up. Occasionally, I would leave the office for a day to inspect farmland put up for sale and most likely headed for development. I enjoyed these trips, but at the same time felt saddened that the land, which so appealed to me, might end up with a sprawling industrial facility or a crop of new houses to replace its corn or alfalfa. Secretly, I wanted these farms to remain intact and preferred that the client change his or her mind.

One day it dawned on me that I would be far happier waking up each morning on a farm in the country rather than in a New York City apartment, and that working on a good piece of land, and looking after it, might bring me greater

at least to try my hand at farming. It was one of the best moves I ever made.

Running a small organic farm is more like a life than a job. You get to do everything: drive a tractor, till the soil, plant, nurture and harvest your crops, and finally sell them to the public. You run your own business, balance your books, watch the bottom line, and watch the weather. You make decisions, for better or worse, and move on. There's little time to second guess yourself or indulge in regret. Best of all, you work outside, watching new life unfold as you deal with the joys and frustrations of your dependence on the sun, wind and rain. And if you care about what you're doing, you'll gradually develop an ecological perspective and

Today, more and more people are choosing to buy their food from local farmers. Organic herbs and vegetables like those grown on Keith Stewart's small farm are becoming high-demand produce for the public.



work to maintain a balance between your own needs and the needs of the myriad living things that share the land with you. In the end, this balance and sense of a larger community is what is most rewarding. It's a good life, if it fits, and if you're willing to work at it, but it's not easy.

Small farmers must compete with huge agribusiness companies that control much of the food landscape in this country. Unlike small-scale, organic operations, these huge farms are often heavily subsidized by the federal government. There's also cheap imports from China and elsewhere (including Chinese garlic that comes into the U.S. for just pennies a pound), cheap labor, cheap processed foods made from subsidized commodity crops like corn and soybeans, and cheap petrochemical fertilizer and pesticides (though these are getting less cheap by the day).

All this means that small farmers in America who want to practice sustainable methods have their work cut out for them. But more and more young people are taking up the challenge and showing that it can be done. It helps that the eating public is ever more enthusiastic about fresh, local food with a human face—food that tastes good and is good for you. Every year more people want what small farmers have to offer and are eager to put their money where their mouths and stomachs are. This makes all the difference.

During the heart of summer, life on the farm is intensely busy. My seven- or eight-person crew and I will harvest those 60,000 garlic bulbs, as well as more modest numbers of onions and shallots. We will sell as many of these alliums as we can and cure the rest so we can continue to sell them right through Christmas. We'll pick a thousand pounds of flavorful, field-ripened tomatoes each week and take them to market, along with summer squash, zucchini, cucumbers, lettuces,



Life on a small farm requires hard work, like digging these potatoes, but the knowledge and cash gained from a successful season help ensure future success.

potatoes, beans, basil, parsley and more. We'll set out many thousands of transplants of cold weather greens, for mid- and late-fall harvest: different varieties of kale, broccoli, collards, Swiss chard, Italian dandelion, Oriental greens, and whatever else we can grow and our customers are keen to eat. To help the crops thrive, we'll wrestle with irrigation lines and sprinklers, and face an onslaught of fast-growing weeds, eager to produce seed before the growing season comes to an end. And, hopefully, at the end of the growing season, we'll deposit plenty of cash in the bank.

On a farm like ours, autumn is the most enjoyable time of year. The hectic pace and sometimes oppressive heat have usually passed. Cooler, more settled days make field work a pleasure. When the fall harvest is in full swing, the fruits of

our labors are plain to see. And if, as is sometimes the case, we haven't planted, or weeded, or labored quite enough, well, it's too late to do much about that, so we might as well accept what we do have and be thankful. We'll just have to make sure to do a little better next year, and make use of the new knowledge we've gained.

As I look over the fields of this year's crops, I reflect on the fact that it's the final step of the season that helps make sure our farm remains in business—setting aside at least 10,000 garlic bulbs from the summer harvest. In early October, we'll begin dividing the bulbs into individual cloves and grading them according to size. Toward the end of the month, we'll begin planting the cloves, pressing them a couple of inches down into fertile, well-rested ground with the pointed end up and the root end down. All 60,000 cloves

will be planted by hand, in long, parallel rows that follow the contours of the land. Then mulch is added—fifty odd tons of aged bedding material from a nearby horse farm. The whole process will take at least four weeks. It's hard work, but necessary to ensure the continuation of our signature crop. Once the garlic is safely in the ground and mulched for the winter, I can sit back a little and know that another season on the farm has come full circle.

And I can wait, and watch, for the first shoots of spring to burst forth from the ground.

Organic farmer **Keith Stewart** is the author of *It's a Long Road to a Tomato: Tales of an Organic Farmer Who Quit the Big City for the (Not So) Simple Life*, scheduled for updated release in June 2010. He and his wife, Flavia Bacarella, live in Orange County.



Garlic is the farm's signature crop, and it's what brings most customers to their farmers' market stand in New York City.

Organic Opportunities

NOFA-NY Certified Organic Farms—Founded in 1983, the NOFA-NY Certified Organic, LLC now certifies more than 90% of the organic farms in New York State. There are currently more than 550 farms, dairies or processors that are certified organic.

<http://nofany.org/dbapplet/certifarms.html>

NYS Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Directory—

a comprehensive directory to help locate a CSA near you.

(This directory is not all-inclusive.)

<http://nofany.org/dbapplet/csadirectory.html>

Organic Consumers Association—a grassroots non-profit public interest organization that deals with crucial issues of food safety, industrial agriculture, genetic engineering, corporate accountability, and environmental sustainability. www.organicconsumers.org

NY Farms!—a broad-based statewide coalition of organizations, individuals, businesses, agencies and institutions, committed to the future of New York's farms and families. www.nyfarms.info

New York State Farmers' Markets—a listing of farmers' markets found across the state. (Organized by county.)

www.agmkt.state.ny.us/AP/CommunityFarmersMarkets.asp

National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service—a partnership between the National Center for Appropriate Technology and the USDA Rural Business-Cooperative Service. Launched in 1987, the service provides information on sustainable agriculture and organic farming news, and links that identify how food production can affect the environment.

http://attra.ncat.org/farm_energy/food_miles.html

