

GOOD FOR WHAT TAILS YOU

New Brunswick farmer ramping up production of “black garlic”



Barry Connors and his son Harry with their seven-acre garlic crop in Northampton, N.B.

(Brigitte Rivers photo)

by Brigitte Rivers

Barry Connors is a licensed carpenter turned garlic grower. Bucking the out-migration trend, he has returned to his family and farming roots in New Brunswick’s Saint John River Valley.

“I wanted to get out of the carpentry,” he says. “I did it out west for eight years – camp jobs, flying back and forth between my shifts. When COVID hit, my son was one. I decided to retire from working away from home, to be with him.”

Starting a business on the family farm in Northampton, which was established by his great-grandfather in 1926, felt like a good fit. “I own it now,” he says. “I’m an only child, and I’ll pass it down to my son.”

Since the pandemic, more people are interested in supporting local food, says Connors, and they are also becoming increasingly health conscious, which includes eating more garlic. He plans to tap into a growing niche market by processing a portion of his crop as “black garlic,” which he first tried about 10 years ago when it was served as an hors d’oeuvre at

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growing garlic, as well as processing it into black garlic.

“I use a special machine I bought from China,” he says. “You can’t get them in Canada.”

Last year, Connors ramped up production, planting seven acres for the 2022 season. Growing the business required significant investments. “I had to purchase 10,000 pounds of seed that I planted last fall. I have a garlic grading machine, I ordered a larger black garlic ‘fermenting’ machine, and I have a harvester coming from France, out of Ontario,” he says. “I hired a guy out of Halifax that’s doing the marketing and a website.”

As a fourth-generation farmer, Connors knows the importance of mitigating risks and prioritizing quality. He has adopted current best practices, such as cover cropping and crop rotation, as well as leveraging science and technology to maximize crop health.

“I use an agricultural consultant, Av Singh, and I had all my garlic tested by A&L Laboratories in Ontario. I send them soil and plant tissue samples in the fall and spring – and other times too, if I need to – so I can get a healthier, disease-free product. For example, if they’re lacking a bit in something, I can correct that.”

At the same time, Connors says he limits chemical inputs, steering toward more natural solutions as much as possible. The first step in preparing a field is an application of nutrient-rich compost, followed by a cover crop of brown mustard and buckwheat, which improves soil health and cuts down on diseases.

Another important ingredient is disease-free seed, selected for size. “I use Music garlic, a hardneck variety. It’s good for around this area. You plant it in the fall – say, three to five weeks before freeze-up. You let it establish a root base, but don’t plant it too early so it sprouts up out of the ground,” he says. “Once freeze-up starts, it goes dormant over winter, then it’ll come up right away in spring.”

Connors uses a four-row planter, then adds a thick layer of straw mulch to help hold the moisture and protect the seed throughout the winter. That protective blanket also suppresses weed competition, which can significantly reduce garlic growth.

In late spring, the scapes have to be hand-picked – which is a lot of work, but well worth the effort. “You can increase your bulb size by 25 percent or more when you harvest the scapes,” Connors says. “I sell scapes to a local store that makes garlic-scape sausages. He also takes my garlic, and does jars of minced garlic in oil.”

Harvest time is around the end of July. As with planting, the timing is critical. “You know it’s ready when you see two to three dead leaves down at the bottom of the plant, and around six leaves left. That’s how many protective wraps or shells there are around the bulb.”

The next steps are to dry and cure the garlic, then store it in temperature- and humidity-controlled sea containers, ready to be shipped to customers. In addition to seed set aside for his

a restaurant in nearby Florenceville-Bristol.

“I liked it, and started to find out more about it,” he says. “I was impressed by how many more health benefits it has than regular raw garlic. We already know garlic’s good for you; black garlic is basically a superfood.”

Used in Asian cuisine for hundreds of years, black garlic is said to have a rich, caramelized, savory flavour, and a texture similar to a date. As an added bonus, it lacks the lingering, pungent smell of fresh garlic.

“People say black garlic’s fermented, but technically it’s an aging process, a Maillard reaction,” says Connors, referring to the chemical change that can be brought about with carefully controlled heat, creating a browning effect on foods.

Learning about the reputed health benefits of black garlic motivated him to bring this product to a wider audience, alongside high-quality raw garlic. He started with an eighth of an acre, and gradually increased his acreage, building his farm business alongside his career in construction. He did research, took training, and gained hands-on experience in

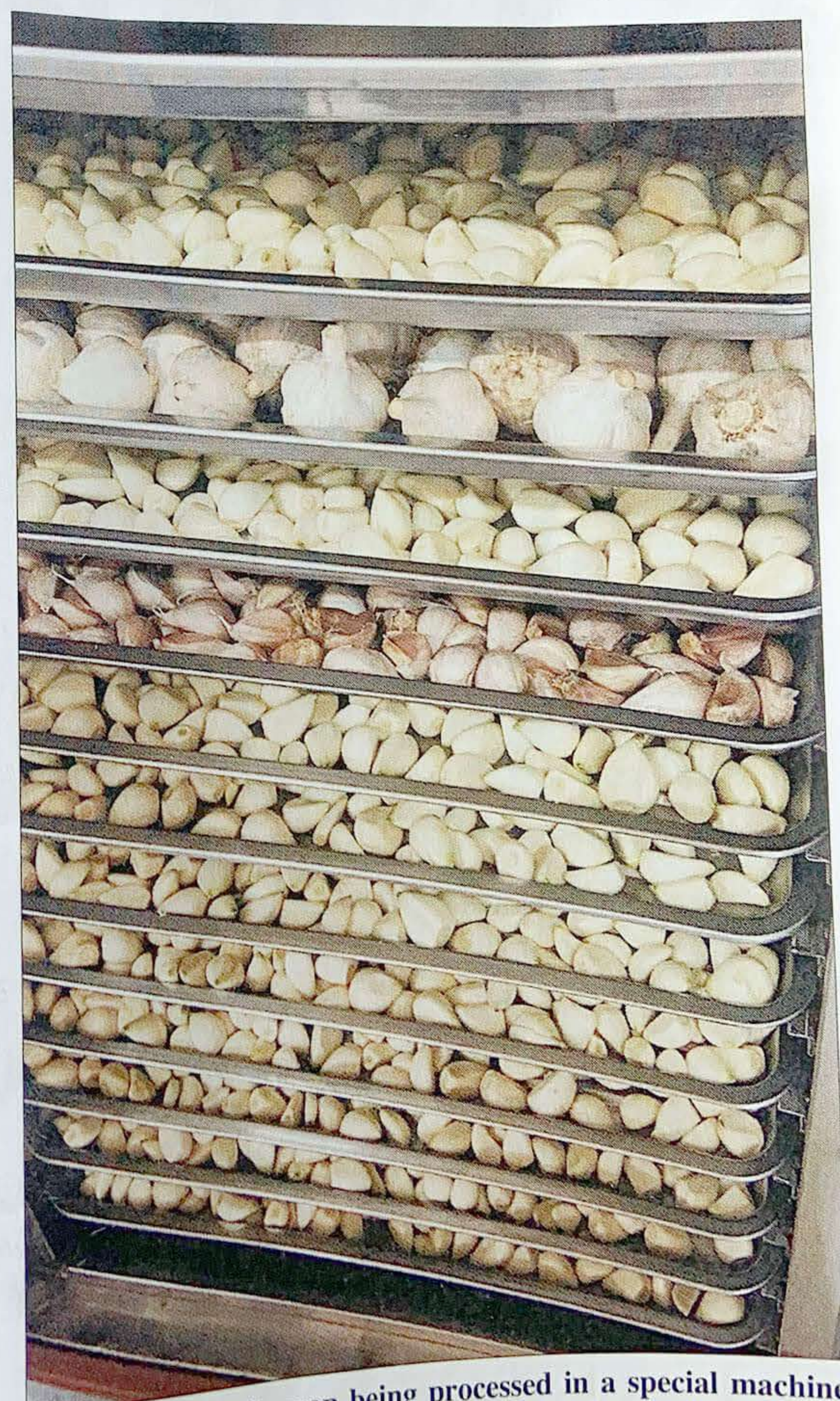
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next crop, Connors has contracts in the works to sell garlic seed, and to supply culinary garlic in Atlantic Canada. “People want the quality, and locally grown,” he says.

Connors plans on continuing to expand his production of black garlic. He says this process reduces the crop’s weight by about 40 percent, but significantly increases its value, as well as its dietary benefits. “It can help with a lot of health and wellness issues, from allergies, immunity, and blood pressure to blood sugar regulation, anti-aging, and sleep quality.”

Packaged for retail, it has a shelf life of about six months. “Once you open the packet, it can last a month or more in the fridge,” says Connors. “It’s a versatile ingredient; you can use it in cooking, soups, salads, sandwiches and sauces, or as a snack by itself.”

(Brigitte Rivers is a writer, illustrator, and yoga instructor based in Florenceville-Bristol, N.B.)



Part of last year’s crop being processed in a special machine to produce “black garlic,” which is valued for its culinary and nutritional attributes. (Contributed photo)

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