

Following the footsteps of a garlic master

Torsten Sandberg from southwestern Finland has one of the world's largest private garlic collections, with over a hundred different-flavored cloves.

Text Sari Järvinen Photos Suvi Elo

When he cocked the bow and let his eyes follow the arrowhead, his right hand hurt. Torsten Sandberg had to face the facts: his hand could no longer handle archery.

— After quitting that hobby, I had time for other things. At that time, I didn't yet know what a clove of garlic could mean to a person, Torsten says.

It all started in 2013, when Torsten bought a few cloves of garlic from Useful Plant Society when visiting The Annala mansion market day. He was working as a vicar of Aura at the time and planted them in the parsonage garden with other useful plants.

The first year, Torsten harvested a modest bunch of cloves. He put them to dry on a coat rack in the hallway and didn't pay much attention to the white heads hanging down.

— However, I am a collector by nature, and somehow the garlic just carried me away. Maybe there was some fateful force in it, he describes.

In a couple of years, Torsten managed to collect representatives of almost all the garlic varieties sold in Finland, as well as those he received from Finnish enthusiasts. At that time, 27 different varieties were already growing in the parsonage.

In addition to the varieties, Torsten acquired the most important books in the field, of which the book *Growing Great Garlic: The Definitive Guide for Organic Gardeners and Small Farmers* by the American organic farmer Ron L. Engeland became his role model.

— Engeland describes in his book how to grow garlic in a clear and practical way. I largely learned from him.

Like Engeland, Torsten uses the term organic farming for his farming method. For him, it is completely different from natural farming.

— I do not use any industrial products or fertilizers and avoid using machines to the last detail.

The garlic harvest has just been harvested when we visit Torsten's current home vegetable garden in central Southwest Finland in August. It has been quite a task, as the harvest has been collected from almost 1,600 plants.

One of the handsome shoots that has emerged from the ground is 'Havran', which is lounging on a perch set up on the roof of Torsten's wife's pony stable.

— I think 'Havran' is one of the five best Garlic in the world. It has a complex flavour: anise, eucalyptus and burning. Torsten received this variety – and about forty other varieties – from the well-known Czech “ultra-organic” horticulturist Martin Smetana. In the first year, 'Havran' grew well, but then it started to backfire. Torsten says that this is typical of southern varieties.

— It can take 5–6 years for the plants to adapt to their new location and start growing properly. After being brought home, ‘Havran’ has also done well. Torsten gently strokes the plump root system that is oozing out from under the clove. You don’t see them on the garlic shelves in supermarkets. If the harvest is done mechanically, the cloves can easily get dented.

— The cloves must not be lifted from the ground by force. How would you feel if someone pulled them by the hair? The cloves should be lifted gently and allowed to dry in peace. But how do you know when to lift the garlic from the ground?

— It is often advised to harvest garlic when the lowest leaves of the plant turn brown. However, it is easy to pick it too early in this case. A better time is when the plant has five to six green leaves left when counting from the top. By then the garlic will have developed a thick, multi-layered skin.

Torsten lets his cloves dry in a pony stable and an unheated outdoor sauna for a couple of months. At the beginning of the calm drying, they often increase in size, and in Torsten's experience, the flavor only deepens.

Torsten's collection now includes 120 different varieties, most of which he has acquired by exchanging with Finnish and other European enthusiasts. At its peak, there were 150 varieties, but the mild, little-snow winter of 2019–2020 destroyed some. Torsten has also created some new varieties through mutation under his care.

— Eight of my varieties have left for Europe. A Dutch garden center took them in for further cultivation and propagation. I don't want to say more about this yet, Torsten says. Torsten considers his collection to be the largest in Finland and thinks that it may even be one of the largest collections in the world owned by a private individual.

— I know each of my varieties by sight. I talk to them in the vegetable garden and play music while they are drying inside.

Torsten's goal is to grow his collection to a couple of hundred varieties and wants to inspire others to explore the fascinating world of cloves. A couple of years ago, he and a few other garlic enthusiasts founded the association ”Härkätien kynsilaukka — De Re Allii Sativi” to share information about garlic and its cultivation.

— People should take more responsibility for their own food production. I believe that Garlic will be even more important in the future, because research has shown that they also have health-promoting effects.

CAPTIONS

Pages 41-42

Work continues on Torsten's farm in August, even after the main harvest. Some of the garlic bulbs have been left in the ground to produce top buds.

Garlic can be regenerated from top buds, which are planted in the ground in the fall. They grow into clove garlic bulbs in the third growing season.

Pages 43-44

Torsten's garlic collection has colors and flavors that are not found in grocery stores.

The Humpgrid variety was created as a result of a mutation in Torsten's farms.

You can recognize well-grown garlic by its dense root system. The picture shows 'Havran'.

The clove garlic is lifted from the ground by gently pulling it so that the roots are not broken. You can use a planting shovel to help a little if necessary.

Pages 45-46

'Lotus' is a speciality that many garlic collectors have acquired because of its delicate purple colour.

When harvesting, Torsten removes at least the two top leaves and washes the plant carefully.

Pages 47-48

Ponies play a significant role in growing garlic, as the manure they produce provides the plants with growth energy.

Torsten did a great job of adapting 'Rosso di Sulmona' to Finnish conditions. He considers it one of the best garlic varieties.

The 'Early Purple' variety has red cheeks that indicate a burning aftertaste.

Box: Torsten's growing tips:

Set up early

Set up a bed by placing cardboard or newspapers on the bottom. Pile horse manure or chicken droppings and compost on top. If possible, make the bed a year before planting the cloves, so that the root weeds have time to disappear. This will also give you time to grow nitrogen-fixing plants that improve the soil and fertilize, such as clover and peas, in the bed before the garlic.

Make a raised bed

Before planting, shape the bed into a 20 cm high raised bed. Mix the manure and compost with sand and good soil, such as forest soil or compost that has rotted for two or three years. Make sure that the growing medium layer extends 40 cm below the ground surface, which is

about 60 cm deep in total. This will give the roots of the galloping horse enough room to grow.

Use good cloves

Plant medium-sized and healthy cloves. They can be purchased directly from reliable domestic growers and enthusiasts.

Plant before frost

Start planting in the fall well before frost so that the cloves have time to take root and grow vigorously in the spring. Cloves planted too late will first grow a small shoot in the spring and then only roots. Torsten plants the cloves between October 10th and All Saints' Day.

Cover with straw

Finally, cover the bed with a straw mulch. Thanks to the straw mulch, the bed does not freeze so quickly in the winter and the cloves can continue to take root and grow shoots. However, a good mulch protects the shoots. In the spring, they can withstand frosts of up to 10 degrees, depending on the variety.

Variety illustrations on a black background

11 x Torsten's favorite

I Siberian Marmorine. A reliable, easy variety to grow. Very stable growth habit and long shelf life. High allicin content that adds a burning taste.

II Bjetin. A variety bred and renamed by Czech Jan Kozak. Strong, multi-hued and herbaceous taste. The flower stalks are also very delicious, like hot sugar snap peas.

III Havran. The same variety as the Russian Petrovski and the Estonian Hummuli, but Havran is a virus-free strain created by Kozak that grows best of these. The flavor has hints of anise, eucalyptus, celery root and carrots just picked from the garden.

IV Rosso di Sulmona. A favorite of Italian garlic enthusiasts with a unique, pungent and sweet taste. One clove is enough for cooking. Stores in excellent condition for a year.

V Vessalico. A gift from the Italian province of Liguria to garlic lovers. It required a long period of adaptation to Finnish conditions, but will reward its patient grower. The taste is mild and refined. You can also find celery in the aroma and taste.

VI Red Estik. A variety belonging to the group of large hard-stemmed garlics, which does not grow too large like the Big Russian, which belongs to the same group. Easy to propagate and renew from sprouts. Reliable and easy to grow.

VII Cielavas. The earliest germinating variety, it usually blooms in early July in southern Finland. Edible in early August after a short drying. Soft taste. Originally a Latvian country variety, to which Torsten has given the variety name, which means "Wagtail" in Latvian.

VIII Early Purple. A variety named by the Englishman Colin Boswell. Blooms quickly, when? The taste is mild and vegetal, with a burning aftertaste. Best before St. Michael's Day (October 5). Can be used like fresh onion sprouts.

IX Burgundy. Difficult to adapt to Finnish conditions. Very suitable for a sophisticated aioli sauce. After a warm summer, the variety can even taste like Carmolis oil. A small clove is good for making cucumber pasties in the winter frost.

X Kolkjan purple. A variety discovered by Torsten in 2016 in the Estonian village of Kolkja on the western shore of Lake Peipus, probably originating in Russia. Large and robust growth habit. The cloves sometimes have a flaming color pattern. Well adapted even to the heights of Keminmaa. Best suited for sautéing, i.e. frying in a pan.

XI The Glory of Sandberg. A variety bred by Torsten. Born through mutations from Messidor from Pehmytniska. Healthy and strikingly upright growth habit and deep green colour. Large and uniform cloves. Very high allicin content.