

Episode 6: Passing It On - From the Archives with John Swenson & Mason Welter

John Swenson: 00:01

It's what every seed saver hopes for. Because you want somebody else to carry on the work that you have done and to build on it.

Melody Reese: 00:26

Seed saving is about more than keeping a variety growing from one season to the next. It's also about passing along the knowledge, experience, and curiosity that help keep those varieties alive. In this "From the Archives" episode on *Sowing Connections*, originally filmed in 2022, we meet two garlic growers. John Swenson spent decades collecting and growing garlic. At one point, maintaining over 200 named varieties. Mason Welter began collecting garlic as a preteen and just a few years later met John through Seed Savers Exchange in 2015. Their shared interest grew into a friendship and an opportunity for John to share garlic varieties, stories, and years of accumulated knowledge to another generation of seed savers. This is "From the Archives" on *Sowing Connections*. I'm Melody, and I'm so glad you're here.

Interviewer 01:33

Why do you save seed?

John Swenson: 01:56

So it's part of the transmission of basically heirlooms which just happen to be plants. I mean, I'm surrounded by family heirlooms which my father made. But plant heirlooms are after all, there's something that you can not only enjoy and learn about, but you can enjoy eating. And I pick garlic because back in those days there was no such thing as garlic seed. And that's where Mason comes in. Mason is really a seed saver.

Mason Welter: 02:41

I've only done uh I've saved garlic seed once. So like that's where you pick out the bulbs and you save like the true garlic seed. Uh but mostly I just grow them out every year.

Interviewer: 02:54

So for people who aren't used to thinking of garlic as something you can save seeds from, can you explain that a little bit more?

Mason Welter: 03:01

Yeah, so usually uh garlic produces uh asexually, so like it clones itself pretty much. So the bulb will form cloves. You can plant the cloves separately and they'll form new bulbs. Uh and then you can also do the bulbils where you can plant them and they'll basically have the same genetics as the original one. But in between the bulbs, there's like the flower structures. So with

I think some purple stripes and a lot of a lot of wild ones that John collected, you can actually pick out the bulbils at a certain stage, and it allows like the flowering parts to mature. And depending on which variety, yeah, you can get seed to produce, and then the seed will actually be genetically different than the parents.

Interviewer: 03:52

And why garlic for you? What brought you to garlic?

Mason Welter: 03:59

Well, I mean, I've been gardening pretty much since birth. We eat a lot of garlic. Um I originally probably got into like more collecting uh when I met Curzio at at the Harbor Market in Kenosha. So uh I met him there probably when I was like 12 or 13 maybe. And he kind of like uh introduced me to how garlic wasn't just what you see at the store. He uh showed me like some four clove porcelain varieties, and he introduced me to Seed Savers too. So uh so then yeah, I got some garlic from him, so that was like the second year I think I grew garlic. And then from there I've just been adding on to the collection, I guess.

John Swenson: 04:45

The reason I started collecting garlic in the first place, this was a little before I joined Seed Savers, but when I read the material about Seed Savers, I said to myself, I would probably want to grow a plant that doesn't cross with anything else because at that time, say 1984, garlic seed basically didn't exist. There were a few people like in Japan and in Kyrgyzstan that were collecting the heads of garlic seed, but it was almost unheard of. My saying is "The only thing scarcer than garlic seed is hen's teeth." But uh so I decided if I was gonna get into Seed Savers and collect something and collect more varieties of something, garlic would be a good choice because it wouldn't be crossing up. And that and then um not long after I it was about the time that I joined Seed Savers, I was in touch with the um Department of Agriculture, the USDA, and uh um I met Dr. Phil Simon, who was at University of Wisconsin and Madison, and he is a PhD geneticist, he has a big lab. And um he was doing genetic work on onions and carrots and then garlic and he was finding some garlic plants that would produce seed. And so I got interested in the possibility of garlic seed and that led eventually many years later to Mason here who is carrying on and is I think probably has got a few garlands that he got from me.

Mason Welter: 07:23

Yeah, quite a few. Most of my collection comes from John.

Interviewer: 07:28

So John's talking about you know not having to worry about crossing, and you're talking about intentionally collecting seed that will not be the same as the parent. Tell us about what you will do with those seeds.

Mason Welter: 07:45

Well, so you have to for them to germinate, they have to go through a cold period. But mostly I'm just looking for things that interest me that plants that grow, I don't know, differently than the

parents, you can taste them, just go by a lot of different qualities basically. And yeah, basically another thing is with when you save seed from garlic, supposedly over time it'll get more fertile. So if you do more generations of seed saving and planting, then eventually you'll be able to produce a garlic that theoretically will form a bulb and seed like readily. So that's kind of the kind of my goal. I mean, I have different like goals and what basically whatever interests me, I'll keep keep growing and share and that type of thing.

Interviewer: 08:37

So how did the two of you meet each other?

John Swenson: 08:42

We met out at a campout. It was about five years ago, wasn't it?

Mason Welter: 08:48

Yeah, I think my mom was in line for lunch and I was uh doing something or talking to someone, and I think she met, did she meet Colleen first? Yeah, I think she met Colleen first, Joel's wife.

John Swenson 9:02

Collen Giardin

Mason Welter 9:04

Giardin, yeah. And then they basically started talking. It was like, oh what are you here for? And they, they uh you know, oh I'm interested in garlic. She said, Oh, my husband, he wants you to meet someone. So then yeah, then they basically Joel and John and a few other people, I think, yeah, we went into the one room at Seed Savers

John Swenson: 09:27

The visitors center.

Mason Welter: 09:28

Yeah, the visitor center. And yeah, we were talking there for like it must have been at least three three hours.

John Swenson: 09:36

Quite a while.

Mason Welter: 09:37

And yeah, so that's how so we hit it off.

Interviewer: 09:43

So you two met at the conference, and I know that you've seen each other at follow-up conferences, but have you also maintained a connection outside of the conference?

Mason Welter: 09:55

Yeah, uh yeah, we email each other or have in the past a little bit. Uh him and him and uh Joel were sending me, I think, a lot of articles. Joel especially, he was sending me a lot of like winemaking recipes and stuff, and yeah, we've been in communication.

John Swenson: 10:15

The biggest thing that we've done together was a few years ago, Mason and his mom came down here, and I had, I was sharing my then collection, which was a lot smaller than what it was at the high watermark of my garlic growing. But I gave him, I don't know, a lot of garlic. And uh so we sat over there at my dining room table and I trotted out all my bags of garlic and shared them, and uh the rest is history, as they say.

Mason Welter: 10:59

Yeah, so I we basically I planted half of all the varieties here, and then I took half of all the varieties at home, and then so yeah, then I've had those since then.

John Swenson: 11:11

I uh I eventually well given my physical limitations, I had to cut way back. At one point in my garden I had over 200 named varieties of garlic. And um after the garlic expedition to Central Asia when we brought back a lot of alliums, um I decided that and I think my I think it was my wife who had something to do with it like you simplify your life, and I cut way back on the amount of garlic I was growing. Because trying to maintain like two over two hundred different varieties was too much work. I sold my collection to Ron Engeland. And uh so he's been maintaining them and passing them on.

Interviewer: 12:32

So Mason, John's talking about how much work it takes to maintain that many varieties of varieties of garlic. I don't know the number for you. How many varieties do you have?

Mason Welter: 12:42

I believe I'm around 110, give or take. So yeah, it's a lot of basically just keeping track of where everything is and making sure everything's labeled. And I use a map, and then just from every point you do anything, if you're taking them out of the field or putting them in, or when you dig them up, you have to I basically put each variety in a bucket, and I'll have a whole bunch of buckets down the section, and I'll throw a tag in there with them. And then I'll string them up in the barn with and then staple the tag onto the string. So then basically the tag has to be with a garlic through the process, you have to make sure you don't lose it. And yeah, and then you put them in the bag, and I just alphabetize everything and and then do it all over again. It's just a lot of labeling and keeping track of it mostly.

John Swenson: 13:33

It's a lot of work, you have to have real enthusiasm to do it, and to do it right, because I found after many years of life, it's easy to be wrong. You gotta be smart because it takes knowledge and dedication, also a thirst for knowledge, because you never know enough.

Interviewer: 14:05

Do you have any advice for anyone who wants to start something like this for themselves?

Mason Welter: 14:11

Don't try to just take on whatever your ambitions are right away. Maybe just pace yourself a little bit. Um and make sure the seed stock you're taking to plant is relatively clean. Um I've gotten, I've gotten stuff that was infested, and that was like the first garlic I put in. It was infested with nematodes, I think. So yeah. You want to kind of visually check your garlic and inspect it to make sure you're only planting the clean biggest cloves, pretty much from healthy plants.

John Swenson: 14:46

Yes, if you want to do anything, start small because the old, you know, the old admonition I remember from my mother, "Don't bite off more than you can chew." Sage advice for anybody.

Interviewer: 15:07

Is there a moment that you remember that was either markedly exciting or tremendously exciting?

John Swenson: 15:14

I can say probably being in Central Asia in 1989 on this expedition and seeing garlic in the wild. Um it's it's kinda like I've always been interested in origins. Where does something come from? Whether it's a plant or a word or in the case of Chicago, you know, like Chicago isn't w wasn't always where it is now. So anyhow. But that's, that's my other, that's my other fanaticism which explains all these books here. So uh yeah, I think, I think Central Asia because seeing garlic growing in nature as it has been for millions of years before people came along. That was that was definitely something you would remember that for the rest of your life. The thing about, the thing about garlic is that in the wild it seems to seek out generally unfavorable environments. Because and this is true of of most alliums is alliums are are not good competitors with other plants. And I think the simple reason is that allium roots don't have root hairs, so they don't have a large amount of surface area, however small it may be, to absorb nutrients. And so weeds which do have root hairs, and anybody knows this, they will outcompete garlic. So Mother Nature has figured out that if she can get garlic or other alliums into some place where they may not have weed competition, then they can survive. And so in nature, uh we found garlic would usually be in a dry stream bed in a mountain in the bed of a river which during the the melt off of all the snow would have a lot of water and would uh promote growth. But then the garlic plants would be way down in the subsoil in the in the let's say the stream bed. They're down there and the they're in soil which is moist, and but the the rocks on top of them, maybe three or four feet deep, are kind of dry. Um it takes a lot of work to to dig up uh allium, especially garlic bulbs. So what you do is you go over and you collect the bulbils from the top of the plant, which is above the growing above the rocks. So the bulb may be down maybe three, four feet down below. But it's you don't have that much time and energy to dig it up, so you collect the bulbils, and that's true of a number of alliums.

Interviewer: 19:29

Mason, what is it like to have such a wealth of knowledge to draw from as you're...

Mason Welter 19:36

Yeah, it's pretty overwhelming to try to incorporate it all into what I know, but yeah, he's just an abundance of stories and experience and yeah, just really has a whole lifetime of well-rounded just whatever you want to know, John probably knows it.

Interviewer: 20:01

So, what does it feel like to you to have someone like Mason who's a younger generation carrying on some of the garlic growing?

John Swenson: 20:10

It's what every seed saver hopes for. Because you want somebody else to carry on the work that you have done and to build on it. And uh this is this is really important. So he's maintaining all this, he's maintaining, and by the way, the stuff he's going is the best of the best. There's a lot of garlic out there that uh doesn't make the cut to the varsity. So what we're growing is they're all varsity varieties.

Mason Welter: 20:59

Yeah, I was just gonna say I, I've really liked the Uzbek varieties that I got from John. Well, I got half from John and half from the USDA. But they just the tops they grow at least at least like past my waist, that the scapes will get, well how how tall do they get now? They they just grow so much more vigorously than the yeah, the the wild garlic.

John Swenson: 21:28

Yeah, the the wild garlic. I've grown some wild garlic from Uzbekistan that was collected over there in 2012, I think it was. And there they they collected about 20, pretty near 30 varieties. And anyhow, some of those garlic plants produced leaves that were forty-four inches long. That's a big plant. Now the bulbs themselves. Are not necessarily enormous. But the plants are huge. I mean forty-four inches long and the scape will be, the scapes have gotten as up to six feet tall and maybe a little bit more. But uh but the um the garlic that's been in cultivation for a long time usually has acquired a virus that doesn't kill the plant, but it kind of stunts its growth. So garlic that's been in cultivation for a long time will not be that big and the leaves will be maybe what twenty inches long, something like that. Um and uh but this this wild garlic, and I've got a bunch of it right out there, it's from Uzbekistan. And uh I just have a whole that's a big dense planting of it, so but and the garlic in in nature the the bulbs are dinky. I mean they'd be the size of a nickel. But once you take that plant material and put it in good garden soil and eliminate weed competition, stand back and look out because you're gonna get some big plants.

Interviewer 23:31

Are there other plants that you've tried to grow with garlic?

Mason Welter: 23:34

Well, this year I'm growing sweet potatoes right along the edge of a garden to hope hopefully keep the bindweed from creeping in because sweet potatoes pretty much grow more vigorously than bindweed. So and it's I did that last year and it seemed to work good.

John Swenson: 23:50

The one problem with garlic is it it's about a nine-month process from when you plant your clove or bulbs or whatever until you harvest. And so, you know, your your garden space is tied up for nine months, so if you can find another way to use it, it's it's a good idea. Um I've I've never really done that. I've just I just would rather turn the garlic loose and let it grow. And and I always have a lot to share with other people. Because what good is knowledge or garlic if you can't share it?

Melody Reese: 24:38

John began this conversation by describing seed saving as a way of preserving and transmitting plant treasures to future generations. In his friendship with Mason, we can see what that looks like. Garlic changes hands, but so does knowledge, experience, and curiosity. Mason can build upon what John has learned and then share what he learns with others. That spirit of sharing is at the heart of seed saving and at the heart of the connections that keep seeds, knowledge, and stories moving forward. Thanks for joining us on this episode of *Sowing Connections*. We'll be back in two weeks for another featured episode. Subscribe so you don't miss it. We'll see you soon.