



December 2023 Newsletter

Hello fellow garlic lovers!

The garlic is all planted and mulched here at the Living Soil Garlic Farm. You might expect life to slow down a bit as we enter December, but that never seems to happen. We have several large projects to complete before spring, so the extended forecast for a mild winter in northwestern Pennsylvania because of El Nino is welcome news. (Normally, I love snow!)

Planted and carefully labeled in the first week of November, the garlic is all rooted solidly and has sent up short shoots that are snug and protected under a thick layer of mulch. In years past we have grown a total of 55 varieties of garlic. We had cut back to 16 varieties last year because many of them didn't do well in our climate and it's a LOT of work to keep so many varieties accurately labeled at every stage of their life each year. This year we decided to cut back further to 12 varieties that have done the best for us. Most of them are in the Porcelain Group, with a few Rocamboles and one variety from the Asiatic Group.



Six beds of the new section planted and mulched with straw.



Durable labels cut from aluminum pop cans. An ink pen makes a lasting impression. Be careful handling such labels because they are as sharp as razor blades.

As we say on our website, we strongly prefer to use shredded leaves for mulch. Last year we had problems with our newly acquired (but old) leaf vacuum. We ended up mulching about half of the beds with straw. Straw “worked”, but we definitely prefer shredded leaves. Compared to straw, the leaves do a superior job of protecting the soil from temperature extremes, holding moisture, and providing carbon and micro-nutrients to the soil. Also, a 6-to 8-inch-thick layer of shredded leaves gives complete weed suppression until the garlic is harvested in early July. Last year the straw allowed some weeds to get through, and grain contained in the straw actually created a significant weed problem. I am not a fan of pulling weeds, but was forced to do so repeatedly throughout May, June, and early July. Unfortunately, this year we once again had problems with the vacuum from the very start, so we ended up using straw for all the garlic beds. I’m not looking forward to dealing with weed problems again next year, but will do what must be done. Garlic does not deal well with weed competition, and bulb size will suffer if they are allowed to grow.

Planting only the largest cloves from the largest bulbs in each variety, we were able to increase our total by 20% over last year. That was our first year selling retail, so we were amazed when we promptly sold out of all that we had set aside for marketing. Thank you again to all of our amazing customers!

Next year we are planning on trying to significantly increase our numbers as more beds have their soil improved by cover crop root exudates, soil bacteria, fungi, protozoa, earthworms, and who knows what other soil biology is now living there. Two years ago, the new beds were part of an abandoned section of our yard, about half full of trees. Also, it was very wet, completely unsuitable for growing vegetables, and certainly unsuitable for growing garlic. We cut and cleaned up the trees, which are now making our home toasty as they glow in the woodstove. A friend who operates heavy equipment did an outstanding job pulling the stumps and installing field tile to provide drainage. This allowed us to create 22 new beds for garlic and other garden crops, in addition to the 15 we already had. The beds are 3 ½ feet wide and 90 feet long, and hold a LOT of garlic. After more than one year of continuous cover crop rotation (including last winter) the soil has now improved to the point where I used six of those new beds this year for garlic. The rest will be used next fall.



Digging the top ditch across our property line to capture water running down off of our neighbors during storms.



The main line going down to the road ditch. Five lateral lines come in from each side.



One of the dozens of stumps pulled.



The perforated pipe is installed, the stumps pulled, and grading completed.

Challenges never cease, and now we are back to dealing with one that I hoped we had put to rest. Deer don't eat garlic, but they do destroy our cover crops, many veggies in the garden, the blueberry and raspberry bushes, strawberries, and most of the extensive flower beds we grow for beauty and the pollinators. Basically, deer destroy just about everything. In early October, 2022, we installed a double strand electric fence around our entire 2.5 acre yard. I had no confidence that it would work, believing we needed an 8-foot fence designed for deer. A farmer friend encouraged me to try the electric approach, and to my amazement, it actually worked for one year! They could easily have walked under it or jumped over it, but they didn't realize that, and it held them at bay.

All good things must come to an end, or so they say. The deer are hungry as there is very little food for them to eat, and we have excessive numbers of them. This October the temptation of the radish cover crop was too much for them. They got in and realized what they had been missing out on. After that we could not stop them. Now they are coming in and eating the rye cover crop that is trying to put solar panels and armor on our beds for the winter. I have started the project of building an 8-foot high deer fence around the whole property. I do not want to do it, but see no alternative. If you are having deer problems and need help, consider looking

at the website www.deerbusters.com. (We receive no compensation from them and got no breaks on our fencing materials. We just like their plastic fence, and it might be helpful to you.) We purchased the Extra Strength plastic deer fence and I hope to have it up before the end of the year. Even that will require regular inspection and maintenance, but at least it will be a more effective barrier to the marauding thieves. Deer are capable of jumping over an 8-foot fence, but they are far more likely to find an opportunity to go under it, so the bottom must be securely fastened down between posts.



I helped build the same kind of fence at our local Community Garden in 2021. It is nearly invisible beyond about 20 feet, and it is completely effective even though it is only 5 feet tall.



A section of new beds with rye as a cover crop for winter. It should be about 6 inches tall but it is struggling to hold at one inch because of constant deer herbivory.

This month's recipe!

GARLIC SPINACH DIP



- 10 oz. package frozen chopped spinach
- 1 c. mayonnaise
- 1 c. sour cream
- ½ c. grated parmesan cheese
- 3 cloves of garlic, finely minced
- salt & pepper

Thaw the spinach and drain well, pressing out as much water as possible. Mix with the remaining ingredients. Cover and refrigerate at least 1 hour to allow the flavors to blend.

Note: This recipe came from my sister. When she takes it to a gathering, there is never any left to take home. It is sooo garlicky good!

We wish you all a very Happy Holiday!

Dave & Julie

www.livingsoilgarlicfarm.com