

It's Garlic Time in Essex

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Photo by Karena Garrity/The Courier

A hobby of farming garlic has grown into more than a pastime for David Sousa, one of the Ivoryton Village Farmers Market staple vendors each Saturday morning.

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ESSEX - Planting, weeding, growing, and harvesting a variety of hardneck garlic in Essex has become a full-time hobby for David Sousa, who also works as a full-time engineer at Whelen Engineering in Chester. A favorite staple of the weekly, Saturday morning Ivoryton Village Farmers Market, Sousa and his Essex Garlic are known for both his garlic as well as his garlic bread, samples of which he hands out to passersby, introducing them to the explosion of flavor that comes from fresh, locally grown garlic.

"I love watching the reaction of customers who have never tried my

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his crop annually in late July, making right now prime time to scoop up some of the fresh, locally grown cloves.

Sousa honed his garlic farming skills to perfection a few years ago, starting it as a means of staying busy after a family loss. Expanding his garden from his own backyard to a rented parcel of more than three acres on Route 153 in Essex, Sousa now plants, grows, and harvests several different varieties of hardneck garlic, which, unbeknownst to many, grows very well in the Connecticut climate.

"Garlic adapts to any environment, but it especially likes nice cold winters, and wet springs, so this year was perfect," said Sousa. "The colder the winter, the spicier the hardneck garlic."

Explaining the difference between hardneck and softneck garlic, Sousa said, "Hardneck garlic provides a superior taste. It is kind of like the difference between a fresh garden-grown tomato and hothouse tomato bought at the grocery store."

Currently Sousa offers customers three different varieties of his garlic: German white garlic, Spanish roja, and Metechi.

German white has a robust, smoky flavor. It's easy to peel and stores for six-plus months. Sousa said this variety of garlic is great for roasting due to the large clove. Spanish roja garlic has lots of flavor and peels easily. It can be stored for up to four months. Metechi garlic is also known as "great bulbs of fire"-it has a fiery taste and is the longest-storing variety Sousa grows.

In addition to a wide array of garlic bulbs, Sousa also sells fingerling potatoes and shallots at the farmers market and harvests garlic scapes earlier in the season in mid-June.

"*The New York Times* wrote a piece on garlic scapes and ever since, they have become a delicacy to a larger population," said Sousa.

Garlic scapes are what serve as the stem, from which the seed head of the garlic bulb is formed. They are only produced by hardneck garlic varieties and contain a burst of flavor. They can be used raw or added to make pesto, chopped into short sections as an addition to stir fry, or cut up and steamed as a side dish. Sousa provides recipe cards for customers with a number of suggestions on how to use garlic scapes, as well as his garlic, in different forms of cooking.

"I like to use my garlic to make tomato salad. I crush up the raw garlic and just put it right on top, or I like to bake pork chops in a chopped garlic breading, and of course I love to make my fresh garlic bread all the time," said Sousa, who recently became the manager of the Ivoryton Village Farmers Market.

"I think farmers markets are wonderful. This is the way that food was meant to get to people, by way of the farmer. We offer fresh, good, locally grown food to our customers, and it's a great way for everyone to learn about where their food comes from," said Sousa who also sells his produce at the Higganum Farmers Market on Friday evenings.

"Farming is basic entrepreneurship right here with small businesses at work, and the first thing we have to have is the customers. If



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Luckily, Essex Garlic has turned into a self-sustaining hobby for Sousa, who admitted that there is a lot of time and effort that goes into this hobby, from the several days of planting the 10,000 cloves by hand, to the irrigation, and most importantly the spring weeding.

"It's not easy, but I really enjoy it. However, I do think that for now I am going to be keeping my day job," Sousa said with a smile.

For more information about Essex Garlic, visit www.essexgarlic.com.

For additional information about the Ivoryton Village Farmers Market, which runs Saturday mornings from 10 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. through October on the Ivoryton Green next to the Ivoryton Playhouse, visit www.ivorytonfarmersmarket.com.

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