



The Good Earth: Bon Terra Nurseries in Brewster

by Lisa Markley

Clare Bergh became a farmer out of necessity.

As a 10-year-old growing up in Plainville, MA, she tired of the Minute Rice and canned vegetables that were staples at the dinner table. She decided to fulfill her craving for fresh produce by growing her own.

That year, without any formal training as a gardener, Bergh let her fingers run through the soil for the first time. With her father's help she started to grow her own vegetables on their 12-acre property, trial and error her rally cry.

Her initial youthful venture into gardening produced tomatoes, lettuce, beets, corn and even carrots for her pony. Bergh's father, a novice himself, provided as much help as possible as the pair diligently read seed packet labels and followed instructions.

Bergh, 47, has been a full-time Cape Codder since 1993. Her father also resides full-time on Cape in the family's former summer home on Pleasant Bay in Chatham.

She misses her mother, who passed away in 2003, but knows it was her mother's penchant for canned vegetables that left Bergh craving the real thing.

Since 2001, Bergh's provided her loyal customers with their favorite produce as well as a few surprises at the [Orleans Farmer's Market](#).

Bergh, owner of [Bon Terra Nursery](#) in Brewster, is a familiar face at the popular market, held every Saturday during the growing season. She's proven herself to be one of the most prolific farmers on the lower Cape.



Clare's Tomato Plants for sale at the Orleans Farmers Market

At the July markets, Bergh watched over 43 varieties of garlic, meticulously displayed with labels and typed descriptions. She has an easy rapport with the visitors that stop by her market table, many inquiring about her wide selection of garlic.

Bergh is glad to answer questions, but she makes it easy on the consumer by placing the varieties of garlic in alphabetically labeled baskets. Each sign lists the characteristics of the various bulbs on the table.

Bergh explains to a customer that her favorite garlic is the Siberian, described by her typed sign as "True garlic flavor. Downright delightful. Outstanding variety."

The woman gladly purchases the recommendation and laughs as Bergh describes a regular at last year's market who worked her way through the alphabet and came back weekly with a verbal review.



The Orleans Farmer's Market

Saturdays from 8:00 am – 12 Noon

May 15 through November 27
21 Old Colony Way, Orleans
(across the street from Capt Elmer's Restaurant)
www.orleansfarmersmarket.com

As the season progresses, Bergh changes hats from the "Garlic Lady" to the "Pepper Lady." Her table fills with 17 types of sweet and 24 selections of hot, measuring from mild to "I can't feel my lips."



The neatly typed labels display numbers instead of adjectives as the 41 varieties of peppers are separated by the Scoville Scale, a measurement for spicy heat. The higher the number, the hotter the pepper.

Bergh has something for everyone, including an 8000 count Thai Hot Giant and a 450,000 count Habanero Chocolate. If you require it sweeter or hotter, just ask. Bergh will find what you need.

Despite her early interest in agriculture, Bergh was discouraged from pursuing it as a course of study. Her mother, father and brother were all engineers. Her father thought she should go to business school.

She followed his advice, studying business economics and computers at Endicott College and St. Anselm. She returned to Endicott to pursue an Interior Architecture degree.

Bergh worked at a variety of jobs after college, including a stint at an architecture firm and a venture into sales which she hated. An opportunity to landscape and run a nursery proved to be the winning combination as she returned to her true love – gardening.

Although Bergh would love to take advantage of the educational opportunities available in horticulture now, her self-taught methods have proven successful. "The internet is an amazing thing," comments Bergh. "When it came along, you had the entire world at your fingertips."

After running a nursery for a landscaping company for several years, Bergh bought the business and the name in 2001. She moved Bon Terra Nurseries, a French and Italian combination meaning "Good Earth", to its current location in Brewster in 2003.

Her 3-acre property includes a tidy two-story home, a small barn, a green house, a chicken coop and numerous gardens.

One of her first ventures after purchasing the property was to have 400 small trees cleared to make room for future garden expansion. She saved the wood chips from that project and uses them throughout her property to protect garden beds and retain moisture in the soil.

With an easy smile and a quick laugh, Bergh is the picture of comfort as she moves through the lush beds as she gave a recent tour to a visitor. She's assisted in her work by her two rescue dogs, Tucker and Conrad, the resident "exterminators."

The passion she has for her chosen profession is evident. As Bergh climbs down from a ladder, after coaxing Mexican cucumbers up a wire fence, she eagerly explains how her self-installed drip irrigation system works to keep the plants lush even in this summer's record-setting temperatures.

Bergh enthusiastically points to a row of snap peas that are about to defer to the tomatoes that are growing underneath. It is a method called companion planting, which Bergh seems to have mastered.

Bon Terra Nurseries has turned into a year-round venture for Bergh, who uses only certified organic fertilizers on her farm. The hot summer months are her busiest, but also her most rewarding time of year as the fruits of her labor begin to ripen.

"Farming can be downright grueling," says Bergh. But just when the harvest season draws to a close and cold weather sets in, Bergh is reenergized with the arrival of the seed catalogs. "Forget it," says Bergh. "I'm like a kid in a candy store. My adrenaline just starts pumping."

Generally, she enjoys two quiet months in the winter, where she can spend more time riding the Punkhorn trails on her quarter horse, Jake. However, she admits that as long as she can beat the frost and turn the soil, she'll be in the garden.

When asked what her favorite aspect of farming is, Bergh pauses momentarily and replies, "The solitude and being your own boss. When you're out there, you can talk to yourself. You can answer yourself. It doesn't matter."

She also finds satisfaction in watching her hard work pay off. Bergh describes her first tomato of the 2010 season, which she picked and ate "as-is" on July 4th. Her eyes sparkle as she relates the story.

What does the future hold for Bergh? "I'd like to continue to sell as long as I can. Eventually I'll be down to a few plants. I'll grow a nest egg and retire at 60." Her eyes scan the gardens that surround her and Bergh smiles, satisfied that she is right where she needs to be.

Lisa Markley is a resident of Brewster, MA, where she resides with her partner Sarah and their chocolate cocker spaniel Sophie.

Photographs for this article are published courtesy of Peter Groves: www.oreansfarmersmarket.com