



SEEDHEADS TRANSCRIPT

Episode 15: GREG WINGATE English

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Steph: Hello! Welcome to SeedHeads, the cross-pollinating podcast where our Canadian seed heroes tell their stories, share their how-to tips, and talk about the seeds they love. I'm your host, Steph Benoit, coming to you from Ottawa, Ontario, on the traditional, unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishnaabe people.

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Steph: In this episode I had the pleasure of chatting with Greg Wingate. Greg is the sole proprietor of Mapple Farm, located in what he describes as the “back woods” of Albert County, New Brunswick, just south of Moncton, on the territory of the Mik'ma'q and Wabanaki peoples. Started in 1989, Mapple Farm bears the distinction of being one of the oldest seed companies in the Maritimes. During our conversation we talked about some of the many varieties Greg has come to know and love in his more than 30 years running Mapple Farm. And we discussed his philosophy around seeing gardening and seed growing, first and foremost, as an adventure. Greg was such a great guest to chat with. I hope you enjoy listening to the episode as much as I did recording it.

Steph: Thank you so much for making the time to join us this morning. It's always fun to have people on who have been in it for a little bit longer and have all of these stories to tell of how things have changed and the things they've seen. It's really good fun, so thank you so much for being here.

Greg: My pleasure.

Steph: To begin with, I was hoping you can tell us a little bit about the history of Mapple Farm, why you started it, what unique growing conditions are in your area, and how you've seen it change over time.

Greg: Okay. It was back in the late '70s, when I was looking for a property, that this particular place came available. It was lots of woods and a very reasonable price because it was way back in the woods. I had no road frontage. There's a gravel road that's about a kilometer long to get to the beginning of the property. I've always been a nature boy and so wanted to just build a cabin. I had worked in the woods, I had worked in house construction, so my dream was to build a log house, and that eventually came to be.

After I built the cabin, I had a little bit of cleared space. This used to be a farm apparently back in the 1920s, but they're mostly grown up in woods, beautiful woods; maples and apples and peaches, all kind of dung, furs. It's a paradise for somebody who likes the woods. Then I decided just to start a little garden. Once I started the garden, I just fell in love with that altogether. That was miraculous for me, how wonderful an occupation that was. I loved it so much, I thought, "I've got to find some way to make a living out of this so I can do it all the time."

I have no history in my family of farming or any formal education in farming, but I had developed an interest in books and magazines that covered gardening and farming. One of the things that spurred me on to thinking I could make a living at it was organic farming and gardening magazines, a little tabloid thing back then. They did a feature on a farm in California that was only about an acre and a half large, and they were making like \$150,000 on it back in the '80s.

Steph: Wow.

Greg: Yes, but of course, that's year-round gardening in California. They were selling to high-end restaurants there. I thought if I can maybe make even a fraction of that on even more land, maybe I could make a go of it. Another magazine that I fell in love with and subscribed to back then was *Harrowsmith*. They did a feature on a guy from Poland, Ted Maczka. He was called the Fish Lake Garlic Man. He was surprised moving from Europe to Canada that nobody was growing garlic. "What's going on here? Everybody should be growing garlic. We grow it all over Europe, especially in Eastern Europe." He explained the process and it seems, from the story, it was quite doable. I thought, "Gee, maybe I can do the math."

Back then, garlic in stores was nothing like you see today. The only way you would get garlic if it wasn't crushed and minced in a little tiny jar was that it

came in this little package from Gilroy, California. There were two bulbs to a cardboard, tiny box with a little cellophane window on it, and they were going for 79 cents each back then.

Steph: Wow.

Greg: I saw, while I was doing the math thinking, "Wow, how many garlic can you grow per square foot?" I don't know. It seemed to make sense to me that it would be something that I could grow not only as a crop for fresh produce, but also to get other people growing it, so I could grow it and sell it for seed stock. When I put this to a local nursery, he said, "Don't even bother trying to sell it in the fall. We'll take it in the spring as a started-up potted plant. I thought, those three ways, there's got to go be a way to sell that.

That's what I started with, garlic. I just put an ad in a rural delivery. I always thought from the start that mail order would be the way to go because I would always opt for the unusual things, and I needed a bigger audience than the Maritimes. I put an ad in rural delivery that was a starter trial thing for me a little before the Maritimes and no problem selling out there, and took it from there. Everything grew from that.

Steph: Wow. That's a great origin story. I'm also a huge fan of garlic, so I personally love the fact that garlic was sort of your catalyst for getting involved in this work. Where did that lead to next?

Greg: I thought that was so successful that I would go for some other unusual things. Unusual things is what drives me a lot. I addressed the first page of my brochure for years now, *Fellow Adventurous Gardeners*, because I'm not in it to be another member of the people who grow commodities. I'm into finding treasure. That's my perspective. I had it in my mind to develop niches for things that other people didn't grow. Following garlic, I went to Jerusalem artichokes. That was very unknown. It's still fairly unknown now.

Shallots was a natural follow to garlic because that was sold exactly the same way. It was two to a box. They got a dollar-a-box for two little shallots. The garlic box was three-quarters of an ounce, so you can imagine how small those garlic bulbs were, two of those.

Steph: Oh, wow.

Greg: Yes. The shallot box was one ounce and had two shallots in it. All that was coming from New Jersey. I thought, "Well, the garlic went so well. Maybe I can do the shallots too," and so shallots made it onto the list. Jerusalem artichokes. Horseradish. Few people were selling horseradish. I realized then that I'm selling

very simple, almost perennial things, that I'm not going to get much repeat business. Once somebody gets many people, once they get these things, they're done with me, unless I begin to grow something they'll come back to me for.

To give you a little perspective on what drives me here, I remember when I was a kid and you'd go for an ice cream, this is eons ago, most of the places they'd sell strawberry, vanilla, or chocolate. That was the whole list, if not close to the whole list. When I was young, my father would take us all out to a place called Howard Johnson's and it said "28 flavors". I'm like, "Holy smokes, 28 flavors?" That became a usual thing to go to Howard Johnson's for ice cream. After three or four times, Gary, my brother would always say, "What do you want?" He says, "I'll have strawberry." I said, "Gary, live it up. They got 28 flavors here. Don't you--"

My mind was, "I can't wait to try every single one of them." That's my perspective with gardening. I'm looking for things that other people don't offer. I don't want to sell commodities. I want to find treasures and share that treasure with other people. That led me to the seed-saving world and joining Seed Savers Exchange. Seed Savers Exchange was like an eye-opener for finding treasure from everywhere. When I go, I'm asked to give seed-saving talks every now and then. I always bring the yearbook and show them the 500-page big book, and show them, for instance, the tomato. I've got it in front of me here now.

In the beginning of the book, they make the point that, for every two varieties that are available commercially, there were three available in this yearbook. In other words, most of the varieties you can get that are open-pollinated, that are favorable to seed savers are grown by amateurs rather than by companies. I thought that that's a world of finding a treasure that has yet to be made available commercially to people. I went headfirst into that. When I give the seed-saving talks, I bring the yearbook and I show them. It goes from page 365 here to page 438, and that is just for red tomatoes.

Steph: Oh, my goodness.

Greg: Yes. Every page has two columns with at least 10 varieties on each column. You add that up, that's thousands and thousands of tomatoes, and so I thought I can do my own trials here. When I began Mapple Farm, I was not only doing the seed thing, I was doing the produce thing. I would be able to order all kinds of things and trial them and see what worked to include in my growing catalog.

Steph: Speaking of your catalog and coming back to this idea of adventure and being adventurous with gardening, I was looking through your brochure for this year last night, and I had to Google a few things that I didn't know. I was like, "What does Chinese artichoke look like? What does that compare to regular artichoke or Jerusalem artichoke?" That was fun. Even as someone who spends a

little bit of time in the seed and vegetable world, there are still things that I'd never heard of, so that's wonderful.

Greg: I always wanted to offer things that other people weren't offering selling the adventure of gardening. Also, the adventure of seed saving. For those who wanted something different, I wanted to be the go-to guy for a certain number of things there. I didn't want to sell a commodity, I wanted to sell treasures. I wasn't looking for competition, I was looking to offer things that nobody else had offered before. That's where garlic and shallots and Jerusalem artichokes and those kinds of things started.

When I joined Seed Savers Exchange, I'd be looking for things that other people were growing but you couldn't find in seed catalogs. That's what brings us back to something like-- was it Chinese artichokes that you mentioned?

Steph: Yes, the Chinese artichokes.

Greg: Chinese artichokes? Yes.

Steph: Looked them up.

Greg: That's very unusual. In fact, for the longest time, I was the only one in Canada offering that.

Steph: Oh, wow.

Greg: I got it from a Chinese outfit in Connecticut and that's a perennial. Once you have that, you have it for life. I thought that fit my idea of unusual things that provided no competition, which is right up my alley.

Steph: It's a pretty good business strategy. If you can just find things that are so unusual that no one else offers them, you've got yourself a lane, you've got yourself a market.

Greg: That's exactly what I thought, and that's what I set out to do. I address my letter every year to fellow adventurous gardeners. It's something new. That's what it is for me. I love getting this catalog from Seed Savers Exchange based in the States, from the Heritage Seed Program in Canada, and seeing what people have to offer, especially when they're not available commercially, and then I can bring those things to people commercially.

For instance, the Mystery Keeper tomato, that was one from a gardener in Ontario. That's become one of my great sellers because imagine having a tomato that you can grow and you pick it just as it's mid-ripe towards the end of the season in September or October. I've had people actually save it right through

till the end of June, This is without processing, this is without special conditions, this is just in a basket on a counter table. To me, that was just unbelievable.

Steph: Wow. They were keeping that long.

Greg: They keep that long, the Mystery Keeper. A lot of people are happy to just have something that keeps till Christmas or Valentine's Day. For me, the progeny of the seeds that I'm offering now all came from seeds that made it to Easter easily. Latah was the first tomato I offered. That was because it was the earliest tomato I could find. I thought, why not go for the earliest you can find? I had developed a strategy, this is pre-internet now, of getting catalogs from wherever I could possibly find them and looking for the quirkiest family farm or seed seller that I could find.

I ran into Glenn and Linda Drowns in Decorah. They're not too far away from where the Seed Savers Exchange actually started, which was back in the '70s. They offered a whole huge catalog of different seeds. Latah was one that came out of Idaho and they just offered as something early. When I was doing my trials, it was way earlier than all the early tomatoes I came across, with the exception of Bradley, which was just behind it. Bradley produced all at once. Latah produced right through the season.

Steph: Oh, wow.

Greg: I start that after May and I'm getting the ripe tomatoes before the end of July. That's the one tomato seed I could even just start as a seed right into the ground without having to start it inside. You can start that outside. Just like any other seed without having to start it early, you can still get ripe tomatoes from it within a season in Canada. That to me was just wild. I was then getting requests from Yellowknife and Labrador and really extreme places saying, "Wow." I never thought I could grow a ripe tomato before.

That's what I was after, to offer something that was extremely early, that was flavorful, very productive, and had a long season going for itself. I thought that was a fine. At that time, there was nobody else in the country that offered it. Now there's all kinds of places in Canada that offer it.

Steph: I saw that it was voted the most popular open-pollinated tomato in the region by *East Coast Magazine* around 2000.

Greg: Yes, you saw that. That's true.

Steph: Yes. That's no small accomplishment, nothing to sneeze at.

Greg: It's fun making these acquaintances with people around the world and sharing what they have with other people that, like me, at one time never even heard of these things, so that's kind of cool.

Steph: I imagine walking around your garden is a little bit like having a tour of the world in 60 seconds or more than 60 seconds, but going around and getting all of these little snapshots of things that are unusual and cool and quirky from all over the world.

Greg: Oh, I love trying that stuff, yes.

Steph: And bringing in all the Maritimes. I could see why that would be something that would keep you coming back and being involved with it for a long time.

Greg: There's always something new to try. No matter how many different things you've run into, there's always something new that comes up. I can't help but scratch that itch, you got to try it. Then, if it works, you've got something to offer others.

Steph: Do you have some other favorite varieties over your years of being in this business?

Greg: The thing that Mapple Farm is most known for is sweet potatoes. I don't carry them anymore, but that was probably the thing that Mapple Farm is most known for. I first learned about the possibility of growing sweet potatoes from Nancy Buble, who is a garden writer who wrote for *Country Journal* and talked about how she had success with them in Connecticut. There was a guy, Roger Klein, who was the vegetable specialist at Cornell, who had done in the early '80s some tests with sweet potatoes and actually found a few varieties that did well in northern New York state. I thought that was enough for me to say, "Well, I got to try this."

I managed to get some stock from deep down south on the recommendation of what Roger Klein had suggested. Sure enough, I was having success with sweet potatoes in New Brunswick. I thought, "Wow, this is too much." I offered them just in a rural delivery, which is a regional agricultural magazine in the Maritimes. Coincidentally, Ken Allen, who was a

vegetable gardening writer had done tests the previous year with gardeners across the country on a variety called Georgia Jet and Harrowsmith had found out that, when he was doing his article, they put me in as a source for sweet potato slips.

I was not prepared for that at all so, all of a sudden, I was getting orders from all over the country. There's no way I could find. I was very early in the production of that then and I was getting orders that I just couldn't fill, but it showed me there was demand for it, and for the longest time. I couldn't believe it. I basically had that to myself. Believe or not, there was a guy, his name was Cricket, down in the Carolinas, and he was doing research on-- because certified organics was going to make it obligatory that if a variety was available organically, you had to get that if it was available. If not, then you could go outside of the organic community. In order to keep with your certified organic status, you had to buy something.

When I was certified organic, very early on, and offered sweet potatoes, I was just getting unbelievable requests. In fact, to go back to this guy Cricket down in the south, he was putting together a list. He said, "Do you realize--" he says, "You're the only person in the world that has certified organic sweet potato slips available for sale?"

Steph: Oh, wow.

Greg: That's what I said, "Oh wow." I was in this crazy situation of getting people from the deep south sweet potato-growing countries asking me for a million plants of this, that, or the other. Of course, I said I had nothing near that kind of capacity, but I always sold out very, very early on. Grew as much as I could possibly grow on my own and had always more requests than I could possibly fill, and thought, "Wow, this is a dream come true." I was like, "I can never satisfy the demand for that." That became the thing I was most known for, was sweet potato slips.

Steph: I was reading a little bit about your rationale for sending plants instead of tubers, but it was something-- maybe if you wanted to elaborate on that a little bit.

Greg: Sure. Sweet potato tubers are very cold-sensitive. In fact, if you store them like a lot of produce, if you store them just above freezing, that's the best for them for long shelf life, long storage capabilities. Sweet potatoes can get what's called chilling injury if they're subjected to temperatures below 50 degrees Fahrenheit, which is I believe 10 degrees Celsius. If you try to send tubers in the mail when you need them, and you need basically like a couple of months before you want to plant them, there's no way in Canada you can sell those or ship those tubers in the cold season, they're not subject to chilling injury so that you can grow your own.

It became way more worthwhile to just send the slips because the slips are way more cold-hardy. As long as they don't freeze, they're okay. The other thing is

that they're way lighter than tubers themselves, so when you're in mail order, that's a big aspect. With sweet potatoes, I started early on starting them just for the local area, but as I develop a clientele not only across the country but then into the States, I was starting them as early as I could, and that would be-- like even in the end of February I was starting them. I'd be growing them right through-- I would have them available at the end of March, and that was the earliest I could ship so that they wouldn't freeze on route.

Steph: Do you think that gardeners are looking for different things now or has that remained fairly steady, the interest?

Greg: I think that's always been evolving. I tend to draw a clientele that's a lot like I am, they're looking for gardening adventures, they're looking for something different, and I'm glad to oblige because that is my territory. I'm always looking for something different, something unusual, something that doesn't offer competition, something that's a treasure. I've always attracted that kind of like-minded person or gardener. Then again, you're offering something for sale to nurseries and to fellow farmers who want to stand out in some way and go, "Wow."

I had all kinds of small farmers and small nurseries wanting to add sweet potatoes to their repertoire because who thought it was even possible to grow them in Canada when I first started? In fact, it's funny when I was very early on and was just graduating from hand tools to-- I bought my first walk-behind tiller. The fellow who had a used tiller for sale nearby, I went to get it from. He says, "What do you want to do with that anyways?" and I said, "I want to grow-- what was it then? I wanted to grow garlic. He says, "You can't grow garlic here. You got to be in California to grow garlic." He was from the States, and he says, "There's no way you're going to be growing garlic here," and I said, "Well."

I didn't tell him about the story in *Harrowsmith* that I found. Sure enough, that was an entirely new thing for people at that time. I've always been on the lookout for something different, and there is a clientele in that. There are other like-minded people who are looking for something different. It's not just from a gardener's perspective, but from a business perspective. You would get nurseries. You would get farmers who would be able to sell their wares and say, "Look at this," and people go, "I didn't even know that you could do that here." Not only would they be able to taste something homegrown, but that they have the capacity to believe that perhaps they could grow it themselves as well if they had that kind of bent. That's always where I was coming from.

Steph: Listening to you talk, I wonder how much not having a formal training in plant breeding or in gardening or horticulture or whatnot was maybe to your advantage of just having that sense of not having already absorbed this idea of

what is or isn't possible and coming at it from this very adventurous perspective. Do you think that might be the case?

Greg: I think you're absolutely right on that. There's no question of that. People get taught to think there are things you can't do. I went into it wide-eyed and bushy-tailed without constraints at all. It's funny that the books I go to are like 19th-century books, *The Vegetable Garden* by Vilmorin. These are outstanding references of all kinds of plants and produce that had to be grown organically because that's all there was then, that this was before synthetic inputs.

It's funny that people coming out of agriculture school now and a lot of my customers go, "What fertilizer do I buy for that or how do I--" I think because I didn't go to agricultural school, I don't have the mindset that something cannot be done or that has to be done a certain way that is chemical or synthetic. I come at it from almost a 19th-century perspective.

Steph: That's so valuable. You have three varieties of tomatoes and I believe one variety of cucumber that are featured this year in the showcase garden in Fredericton PEI. You've mentioned the Latah and the Mystery Keeper, but I was hoping you could tell us a little bit about the Mount Roma tomato in the parade cucumber that you have there as well.

Greg: Mount Roma was a tomato I found only available from one outfit called Seeds Trust which was a small outfit. They since went bust, but is a nice little bush Roma tomato that unbelievably when you look at the plant, it's not a very big plant. All you can see are tomatoes. You can hardly see the leaves. It's so bountiful. It's just like a medium-sized Roma or paste tomato. I thought, "Well, there's nobody else growing that. I've got to try that." Once I grew it, I was just blown away by how productive and well-flavored it was. I thought somebody else has got to offer this. I did, and that's the story on that.

There was a variety called the Blond Kopfchen. I was just amazed by-- I had never seen so many tomato flowers on a tomato plant in my life. It would just be hundreds and hundreds of flowers. I was like, "Holy smokes. If those all produce, I'm going to have gallons of tomatoes," small tomatoes, mind you, but I just could not get over the potential that would be in that. Fortunately, for me, selecting for earliness, I was able to get it to produce two weeks earlier over a stretch of years than it had when I first got it. It's not only a gorgeous plant, but a very tasty tomato, and one that's not widely available. That's a winner for me. That was a fun tomato to add to the list.

Steph: And the parade cucumber?

Greg: Parade cucumber, because that was of Russian lineage, it was very early, very cold-tolerant. I'm trying to remember, I think that was Gleckler seeds. That was a little family seed house that was also known for adventurous seeds deep south. That's a great dual purpose because it's not big, but it's not too small. You can use it as a pickle or you can use it as a small salad cucumber I thought right up my alley because I don't want to offer a lot of cucumbers. It simplifies the seed saving to have fewer cucumbers available for sale. It came in record time. I was surprised at how quickly it produces, and I was sold on the idea of that dual-purpose nature.

Steph: When I was looking through your brochure this year, another thing that I had never seen before was-- I think it's pronounced Gobo. Is that how you say that?

Greg: Yes. Are you familiar with Burdock?

Steph: Yes, I'm familiar with Burdock.

Greg: You know those things that stick to you when you go out in the woods and you have a hard time taking them off?

Steph: Also familiar.

Greg: This is related to that, but it's an edible culinary version that comes from Asia, unlike the Burdock we know in North America. It's a nice, big, long root, very popular in Asian cuisine. Once I tried that, I thought, "That's a keeper. Nobody else is offering it. Why not?"

Steph: It was very fun to go through your list and just see the things that I didn't recognize right off the bat. If people are interested in ordering from you, it's probably a little late this year by the time this episode comes out, but next year, what is the best way for them to see what you have available and to order? When should they do that given the demands that you have?

Greg: I've got a website, it's mapplefarm, all one word, dot com. That's Mapple with an extra P, or apple with an M in front, Mapple Farm. I named it that because of the great quantity of maples and apples that just came with this property that I bought many years ago. You can go to mapplefarm.com and you'll see what I have available online. There's also a little button there where you can press and send me a message if you like, an email.

Steph: Do you sell out of a lot of varieties that you have still?

Greg: Yes, particularly for the ones that are perishable like Jerusalem artichokes, Chinese artichokes, Egyptian onions. Those have a short shelf life. Seeds, I build

up an inventory of those, and those are good for more than one year. I store them well and always germination test them. That gives me the option to grow different seeds that would cross with each other in alternate years so that I'm able to offer more seeds. In my declining years, now that I'm an old guy, I'm more subtracting things than adding things just to keep my finger in it because I love doing it and wanting to still be involved in it, but I'm not offering more. I'm slimming down just to be able to keep it going.

Steph: Do you have any advice to people looking to get more involved in gardening or seed production or plant breeding or any of those things? What would you say to them as now someone who's on the more experienced side of that?

Greg: I can only deal with that from my own personal perspective, which is just seeing it as an adventure. I just love finding something novel, something that isn't available to see if it could possibly work in my area. I get the biggest kick out of, even before you can get on your ground, dig up like Jerusalem artichokes and Chinese artichokes from the ground before it's workable and eating stuff that's fresh produce from your own ground. There's nothing like it for me to be able to do that.

Turkish rocket, I'm harvesting that along with the sorrel super early, just barely weeks after the snow is gone. There's just so many different ways you can come at this level of gardening. I did it because I've always loved to eat. I've always loved to cook. I always loved to have something different to work with, so my lifestyle is a dream come true for that. I'm just always having something different to work with and try and turn other people on to. To me, that's one of the great joys of the occupation I've taken on, is that I can share this kind of experience with other people and then other people do it with them. It's a pay-it-forward kind of exercise.

Steph: Listening to you talk, your passion for this absolutely comes through, and I think that's so fun. Thank you so much for making the time to do this and sharing your stories with us. This was a great episode.

Greg: Thanks for the compliments. I appreciate it.

Steph: All right. Take care, Greg.

Greg: Take care.

Steph: Bye.

Steph: SeedHeads is produced by The Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security, a program of SeedChange. SeedChange's main office is located on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg People. You'll find SeedHeads wherever you find your favourite podcasts. To find episode transcripts and translations, learn more about our programs, and to support seed work in Canada, please visit seedsecurity.ca.

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