

# In Touch with Prairie Living

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Germans from Russia Heritage Collection  
North Dakota State University Libraries, Fargo



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

GRHC

HERITAGE COLLECTION

The Germans from Russia Heritage Collection at the NDSU Libraries in Fargo reaches out to prairie families and former Dakotans. In various ways, it affirms the heritage of the Germans from Russia is an important part of the northern plains culture. This month Cora Wolff Tschackofske, Dickinson, N.Dak., shares her memories of gardening by her parents and grandparents. Cora returns again in May to the Ukraine to visit her ancestral German villages of Glückstal, South Russia (today in Moldova of the former Soviet Union).

The Germans from Russia who immigrated to America proved to be good gardeners. Their gardens were, above all, an exercise in faith, that same faith which had kept their families fed in the land from which they came. This faith had given them the foresight to bring garden seeds with them when they immigrated. Later they planted these seeds: nourished and tended their gardens with a knowledge and expertise acquired only through a love for their labor to the soil, and for their families who would be fed with their accomplishments.

Gardening by these immigrant families was usually a joint effort of husbands and wives, with the husbands doing the tilling and the wives placing the seeds into the tilled soil in neat, well spaced rows. The task of hoeing was often done by husbands who would rise early morning to hoe before breakfast. Plants for the garden were often started in small containers inside the house, to grow near large windows until planted outside in the garden after danger of frost had passed.

Some early immigrants continued their tradition of planting a "Bastaan." This garden, planted into freshly broken sod, produced watermelons, muskmelons, pumpkins, squash, citrons and cucumbers. These seemed to thrive in the newly broken soil when moisture was sufficient. During a long, dry spell, farmers would haul water in barrels on stone boats, carefully watering these

plants so they could grow and produce. Planting of seeds was scheduled with phases of the moon.

Immigrant families always enjoyed eating cucumbers, watermelons and pumpkins. They were careful to save seeds from their best fruits. These seeds were washed, dried and then stored for next year's planting. Seeds for root crops such as carrots, beets, turnips, and rutabaga, were gathered. Leftover vegetables that had been stored for winter use were planted directly into the soil to grow and produce seeds that were carefully gathered at maturity and, too, stored for seed for next year's garden.

The immigrants' gardens were usually very large. Besides vegetables most gardens had several Gooseberry and Red Currant bushes which provided fruit for desserts and jellies. Large patches of Rhubarb were grown and harvested for pies, kuchens and sauces. Along garden edges, the women planted Chamomile, a small plant which produces a small daisy-like flower. The flowers were picked, dried and then used to make tea. This tea had medicinal qualities which soothed tummy aches in children or was brewed into a "sleepy time" tea for adults. Chamomile seeds scattered vigorously. Wherever the seeds fell, there are still Chamomile plants growing that originated from these immigrant gardeners. These gardens grew several kinds of mint. There was a broad leafed light green mint and a small, dark green, jagged leafed mint. The leaves of mint plants were dried and used to make pungent tea which also had medicinal qualities. Grandmothers would fold a mint leaf into their handkerchief when they went to church on Sunday for the fragrant and scintillating aroma. Many varieties and colors of flowers could be found in all gardens.

A plaque available in some gardening catalogs states, "You are closer to God in a garden than anywhere else on earth." The immigrant families

most certainly felt that closeness because they planted their gardens in faith that God would provide.

For further information about the collection, the future Germans from Russia television documentary, the Journey to the Homeland Tour to Odessa, Ukraine in May, 1999 and German-Russian heritage, contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, PO Box 5599, Fargo, ND 58105-5599 (Tel: 701-231-8416; E-mail: Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu; GRHC website: <http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc>).

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