

# POTATO GROWER

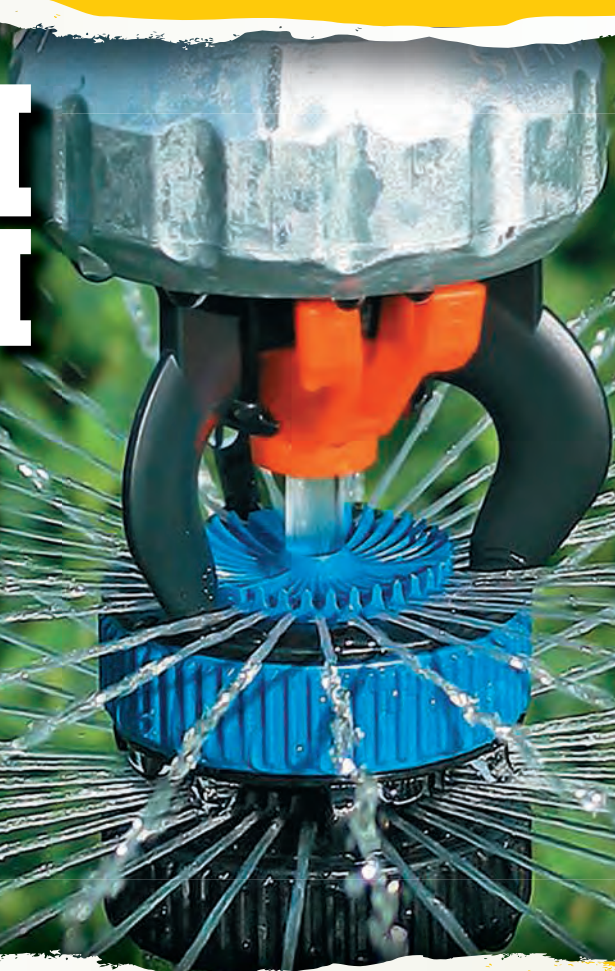
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# DIFFERENT STUFF

**KENOSHA POTATO  
PROJECT'S DIVERSITY**

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# DIFFERENT STUFF

**KENOSHA POTATO PROJECT  
KEEPS POTATO DIVERSITY ALIVE**

Curzio Caravati is not a big-time commercial farmer. He doesn't pretend to be. Nor, he says, is he a scientist. What he feels he is, though, is someone with something to offer. He is, in his own words, "the biggest unpaid potato promoter in America."

Raised in Switzerland by Italian-born parents, Caravati grew up far removed from production agriculture. As a young adult, he was a successful sports equipment salesman, working for American companies such as Nike and Riddell, which led him to move to the U.S. in 1990. Five years later was the start of his farming career.



**Curzio Caravati grows hundreds of potato varieties in micro-plots (growing bags) on three acres in southeastern Wisconsin.**

**By Tyrell Marchant | Photos courtesy Curzio Caravati**



Peachblow  
(released in 1865)  
is a perfect example of  
a strain once sick, healed by  
the USDA, and now available  
as healthy tuber seed from  
Seed Savers Exchange.

Curzio  
Caravati calls the  
Garnet Chili variety the  
great-grandmother of almost  
all commercial potatoes in U.S.  
It is a parent of Early Rose  
and Beauty of Hebron.

**Corazón  
Rosado is a  
South American  
tuber with deep eyes  
and a neo-native look  
to it, is a favorite of  
Caravati's.**

“I had zero experience in food or farming,” he says. “Even now, everything I do, I do for research and educational purposes.”

Caravati grows his crops on just three acres off Highway 32 in Kenosha, Wis., a short walk from the shores of Lake Michigan. Among his crops are micro-plots of dozens of heirloom potato and garlic varieties, as well as onions and fruit trees. He is a founding member of the Kenosha HarborMarket, one of the biggest farmers’

markets in the country. Caravati believes farmers’ market trends are bellwethers of the direction the industry will take in the next several years. What he foretells is continued growth of the specialty potato market, and a boom in urban agriculture.

Caravati is a member of Seed Savers Exchange, a large non-profit based in Iowa and dedicated to preserving seed from thousands of heirloom varieties of dozens of food crops. He spearheads the

**Caravati is a firm believer in diet being as important—if not more so—as medical care in keeping the human body strong as it ages.**



Kenosha Potato Project, which gathers growers large and (mostly) small from around the world to discuss, promote and protect little-known potato varieties. The project currently lists over 400 varieties, most of which Caravati himself grows on his own plot. The vast majority of them are heirloom and exotic varieties.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, many colored varieties were abandoned in deference to russet and white strains. As a result, while germplasm exists of many of those heirlooms, the supply isn't completely healthy and market-viable.

“One of my goals,” Caravati says, “is to make sure all these varieties that people have saved are healthy and available, and that the ones we have in vitro can be brought to market whenever the market demands it.”

Caravati bemoans the dearth of funds that makes potato breeders themselves a rare breed. Nevertheless, that shortage is a cold, hard fact of the industry. Caravati's solution?

“The bottom line is, I'm trying to inspire more people to become hobby breeders,” he says. “I believe urban agriculture will become more important looking into the future. A big part of

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my research is to find varieties that will yield more vertically than horizontally. It's unconventional, and it's a small section of the market, but I think it will continue to grow."

The Kenosha Potato Project group on Facebook has over 2,700 members, a solid indication that there is significant interest in this type of work and individual research. Caravati firmly believes he and others like him will play a vital role in filling in the cracks and being ready with solutions when the larger industry needs them.

"Perhaps there is a new market that is developing and getting stronger, and the industry may have some interest," he says. "Of course, a grower would have to dedicate a small piece of a field to that. But those potatoes come in at much higher prices than the current standard varieties—it's just matter of expanding that market.

"I doubt you will find anybody in America who knows as much as I do about heirloom potatoes," Caravati concludes with a wry chuckle. "I have been eating, digesting and studying heirloom potatoes for many years. I know them well."



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