{ food for thought }

GIRASOLE:

TURNING TO THE SUN

By Brook Le Van

What is good is given back.

— Anonymous

There is a food crop and a person who, individually and in relation to others, exemplify the kind of energy we need to survive the coming challenges in our world. Both are key to our efforts to resettle America. Both are gifts, should we be lucky enough to be in their generous wake. One is a woman: Illène Pevec a humble matriarch, a loving mother and grandmother, community activist and friend to many in the Roaring Fork Valley. The other is a tuber called girasole, Italian for "turning to the sun."

Girasole (helianthus tuberosus) is a member of the same family as the artichoke, and its taste divulges its heritage. The Native Americans called the plant sunroot, but you might recognize it as a sunchoke or a Jerusalem artichoke, common names used here in the crop's homeland, North America. This delicious tuber has traveled to many lands and become part of countless cultures. The same is true for Illène. Everywhere she goes, she brings with her stories, seeds, rootstock, enough energy for three and enthusiasm for six or seven.

Life for Illène is rich in family, community and activism, from Brazil to Vancouver to Carbondale. Pivotal for Illène was a visit to her Brazilian homeland when she was 15 years old. "When I saw the children begging in the streets for food I made a commitment to work with children," she says. "It set my course for a life of working toward social change."

Gardening is the predominant life thread with which she sows it all together. Her first school community garden was the Spirit of Nature garden in Vancouver, at an inner-city school of primarily indigenous and refugee children. She led a group that transformed a space being used to solicit children into prostitution into a living food, culture and arts center, a "grounds for living" on the school property.

Next, she returned to Brazil, where she took on the challenges of its economically depressed urban neighborhoods. She worked with young people to clean up trash heaps, turning them into beautiful and productive food and flower gardens. This led to her earning a master's degree, developing curriculum in ethno-botany for school kids with gardens, and gardening as site and syllabi. She is now working on her Ph.D., focusing on the sensory and emotional responses of youth to the processes of gardening. (Next summer, watch for a sunny line of girasole blooming at the new Roaring Fork High School Farm School, a food education and security project Illène is coordinating with the Central Rocky Mountain Permaculture Institute, Fat City Farmers, Peach Valley CSA and Roaring Fork High School.)

The past few years, at the beginning of each growing season, Illène has stopped by the Sustainable Settings ranch in Carbondale to share her anticipation of getting her hands in the dirt. Her latest visits were all about girasole.

Illène first received the heirloom rootstock of this tuber in 1970, as a gift. She grows it, eats it and shares it as gifts to all she knows. When she showed up at the ranch last fall with a bagful, the tubers were so delicious that in our initial tasting our staff devoured every last one within the week. In spring Illène was back at the ranch with shovels, buckets and the call to harvest the tubers that had wintered over. Off we went to her Carbondale Community Garden plot. We dug and bagged, this time eating few and planting plenty. Those we planted have now grown tall in their 100-foot-long bed, rising more than 7 feet, their blossoms tracking the sun — waking in the east and falling asleep, all faces west.

For the past 40 years Illène has planted her heirloom lineage of sunchokes to multiply the original gift she received. Somewhere in her life's work, she learned that to truly own anything she has to give it away. Her gift to us at Sustainable Settings was the seed of an idea, a new cash crop that could help us generate the earned income that might help us keep the lights on.

Embedded in this gift cycle is the preservation of genetic and cultural information. Spread across the land surface of our earth, tuned in to specific environments, species and individual organisms have evolved as unique creations for the spaces they inhabit. Paired with this is the preservation of the cultural diversity that harbors the knowledge of a people tuned in to their local environments, who know the appropriate species that grow well in niche pockets and who are alert to weather patterns that aid in the process of gaining sustenance from field and forest.

If you don't know Illène, hopefully you know someone like her in your community. Find these people and learn from them. They are the few who understand the need to shift our values and who celebrate the connections and subsequent bounty associated with guiding people to the land. If there is hope for us, it is in our healthy relationships with the soil and plants like girasole, with stewards of the garden and our victuals. And with mentors like Illène Pevec, who give wholly of themselves as they — as we all must do — turn toward the sun.

Sunchoke Chips

Courtesy of Illène Pevec

Sunchokes (from 1 to 10 pounds)
Olive oil
Salt

Preheat oven to 300 degrees. Wash sunchokes well with a potato scrubber. Place in a food processor and slice. Drizzle olive oil onto a baking sheet and rub with your fingers to coat the pan. Spread the sunchoke slices into a single layer across the baking sheet. Sprinkle lightly with salt (you can add another herb if you wish.) Bake until the chips are somewhat dry and have turned a slightly toasty color. As they dehydrate in the oven, the sunchoke chips will become very sweet. Cooking times will vary depending on the amount of sunchokes in the oven at once, so check for doneness after 45 minutes, and then every 15 minutes so that they don't burn. This process works with beets, potatoes, carrots and parsnips, too. Serve sunchoke chips alone or mixed with other veggie chips. They make great hors d'œuvres, snacks or an accompaniment to a meal in need of a crispy contrast.

THE SPECIES:

Girasole, or sunroot, is a member of the family asteraceae, or compositae (known as the aster, daisy or sunflower family), the second largest family of flowering plants, in terms of number of species.

USES:

Sunroots are an herbaceous perennial plant that can reach 9 feet in the field, with high yields, typically 8 to 10 tons per acre (outproducing the potato, for example, four to one). They also make a great, quick windbreak in your garden. Besides the edible tuber they produce, their above-ground stems and foliage make for great hog, cattle, goat and sheep forage. They have also recently been used as biofuel, using inulin-adapted strains of yeast for fermentation. Germans have even found the root useful in making a type of liquor.

CULTIVATION:

Sunroot grows well in almost all soil, except very heavy clay, and thrives best in alkaline soil. They should be planted in spring through early summer and harvested fall through early winter. Tubers left in the ground that are not harvested will restart themselves.

NUTRITION:

The tuber contains inulin, a form of starch that is a polysaccharide from which fructose can be produced. Inulin has cholesterol-lowering properties and probiotic/ prebiotic qualities. Sunroots are high in iron and potassium, and a source of fiber, niacin, thiamine, phosphorus and copper.

PREPARATION:

Sunroots can be stir-fried in oil, baked whole or sliced, steamed, boiled or eaten raw. To preserve the texture, it is best to steam, rather than boil, them. They can be included in salads and stir-fries, providing a crunchy texture. Their sweetness may increase if they are refrigerated after harvesting. Since many nutrients are stored just under the skin, it's best not to peel them. Cooking them with the skins on may make the skins darken because of their high iron content. Once cut, sun-roots discolor quickly, so cut them close to serving time or cut and then immerse them in water with lemon or vinegar to prevent oxidation.