

GARLIC'S FIRST ACT

BY RITA CALVERT

THE GREAT GARLIC SCAPE

At your first glimpse of a garlic scape, you might be tempted to ask, "Do I eat it or wear it?" Since these sprightly shoots are tasty to consume and beautiful to look at, although a little tricky to pronounce, the answer could be, "Both!"

So, what exactly is a garlic scape? A scape is the flower stalk sent up by members of the lily/allium family, which includes onions, leeks, chives, scallions, shallots and garlic. In the mid-Atlantic region, garlic bursts upward with a curly scape usually in mid-June. Left to grow, the scapes will ultimately straighten and then grow little seed-like bulbs. The norm has been for garlic producers to remove the scapes to enhance bulb development. This is the case at Claggett Farm in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, where chief vegetable grower Carrie Vaughn snips the scapes to grow fat garlic bulbs for members of the farm's From the Ground Up CSA (community supported agriculture). But Vaughn, being a firm believer in "waste not, want not," distributes the scapes as part of the CSA shares. When the garlic scapes are still in full curl, they are tender, delicious and full of all the well-documented health benefits of garlic.

Working with Vaughn to develop recipes to help CSA members make the most of their shares, I became enchanted with these curly verdant first fruits of one of the healthiest vegetables on the planet. Here are some super ideas for using garlic scapes in almost every course. The bottom of the scape below the bulge where the flower bud begins is the part you chop for recipes. Use the tops as garnish.

GARLIC SCAPE PESTO

This pesto spread is delicious on pizzas or sandwiches, and you can freeze it for use year-round. The scapes make a pesto that is a pretty green color, and has a rich garlic flavor, but without a hot garlic bite. You can vary the theme by substituting or adding spinach, walnuts or sunflower seeds.

1/4 pound garlic scapes, cut into 1-inch lengths
1/2 cup olive oil (or more for desired consistency)
1 cup grated Parmesan cheese
3 tablespoons fresh lime or lemon juice
salt to taste

Purée scapes and olive oil in a food processor until smooth. Stir in Parmesan and lime or lemon juice and season to taste. Serve on bread, crackers or pasta.

CHICKEN WITH GARLIC SCAPES AND CAPERS

2 whole skinless boneless chicken breasts, halved
2 tablespoons unsalted butter
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
4 tablespoons dry white wine
2 tablespoons lemon juice
4 chopped garlic scapes
1 tablespoon drained capers

Between sheets of plastic wrap, slightly flatten chicken. In a large heavy skillet, heat 1 tablespoon of butter and the oil over medium high heat. Add chicken and sauté until cooked through. Season with salt and pepper. Transfer chicken to a platter and keep warm. Pour off fat from skillet and add the remaining butter, the wine, lemon juice, and garlic scapes and bring mixture to a boil. Stir in capers and salt and pepper to taste. Spoon sauce over chicken and serve. Serves 4.

GARLIC SCAPE AND CAMELIZED ONION HUMMUS

1 cup garlic scapes, cut into 2-inch lengths
1-2 cups extra virgin olive oil
3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
1 28-ounce can chickpeas, rinsed and drained
1/8 - 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper
2 tablespoons Asian sesame oil
1-2 teaspoons salt
2-3 cups "tender" greens such as spinach, arugula, spicy greens mix
1 cup caramelized onions, chopped
(see page 10 for a note on caramelizing onions)

Process the scapes with 1/2 - 1 cup olive oil in food processor for 2-3 minutes until finely chopped.

Add the lemon juice, chickpeas, cayenne, sesame oil and salt to taste. Process until chickpeas are finely ground. You may want to taste at this point to see if more cayenne is needed, but the sauce will "heat up" as it sits.

Add the greens and process briefly so they are coarsely chopped within the hummus. Finally stir in the caramelized onion.

Use as a dip with a drizzle of extra virgin oil or a topping of lightly toasted, coarsely ground cumin. It's also a great dressing for pasta or sauce for baked fish.