

Successful Yukon River Gardening

By ESTER T. DEWITT

"I never tasted lettuce in my life until I grew some in my first garden last year." Maudrey Sommer pointed to her garden on the bank of the Yukon River in Tanana, Alaska, an Athabascan village.

"We all developed such a taste for lettuce that I had to buy it at the store all winter!" All airmailed lettuce costs more than a dollar a pound flown from Fairbanks to Tanana.

"Was it your first garden? How did you get involved in gardening?"

"Yes. Virgil Severns, the District Agricultural Agent flew out and lectured about gardening. I had to work. I'm the postmistress, so my sister, Lucille went to the lectures. We had mailed him samples of our soil for analysis before he came. That way he arrived with a list of vegetables that would grow and the kind of fertilizers we would need."

"Did you follow his directions? Was your garden a success?"

"Yes and no. We rototilled all the grass, weeds and tundra into the garden to help hold the moisture. When that material decays it will feed the soil. We didn't fertilize because we didn't have any fertilizer."

"What did you grow?"

"Potatoes mostly — about 400 pounds, carrots, the cabbage family, the tomatoes and cucumbers

didn't do very well. Mr. Severns said they wouldn't because the soil is too cold with the permafrost below it. That is why we ordered corrugated fiberglass to build a small greenhouse this spring, but something happened enroute."

"About half of it so we covered the rest of it with visqueen and, look the tomatoes and cucumbers! We put in raised beds to keep the plants warmer."

"How do you water your garden? The village has a well but I haven't seen a delivery truck since I came. Didn't you order fertilizer?"

"No! Not at 12 cents a pound freight — the garden is strictly organic. We carry water once a week from the river because it is closer. I make my teenagers do it — they eat most of the garden."

"I've noticed several greenhouses and gardens. Is gardening coming back in style, as a hobby or to add to your diet?"

"As a little girl, the missionaries had people growing gardens everywhere, then it sort of died out. Now with inflation, it is a free supplement to our diet. My grown kids in Fairbanks send me seeds so all I spend is the rental of the rototiller. We've learned to leave the extra cabbage, cauliflower leaves, carrot tops, etc. and plow them back into the soil. When the tundra and the waste leafage decays, the

soil will be even richer."

"How big is your garden, Maudrey? And when do you plan to rotate crops?"

"About 22 feet by 50 feet. Yes, we have the potatoes where the other vegetables were last year. Our garden sure helps the budget and that's important everywhere."

"It's fun too. You can almost stand and watch the

garden grow with all our sunlight that comes from having the 'midnight sun' in the sky most hours of the summer. The garden feeds two families, mine and my sister Lucille's. What more could you ask for."



Tanana Postmistress Maudrey Sommer stands with her daughter in a garden which last year produced 400 lbs. of potatoes, as well as carrots, cabbage, lettuce, tomatos, and cucumbers while a barge passes down the Yukon in the background, probably loaded with other peoples' potatoes.

—ESTHER DEWITT PHOTO