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Belgrade Green Thumb stays close to roots

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For decades, Belgrade's residents included a man renowned for his onion-growing prowess, who doubled as the solo mailman when the town's population stood at about 500.

That individual is gone, and one of his sons has carried on the tradition – but only as someone who raises onions of all shapes, colors and sizes. Nowadays, multiple carriers deliver the mail throughout a city of about 8,000 people.

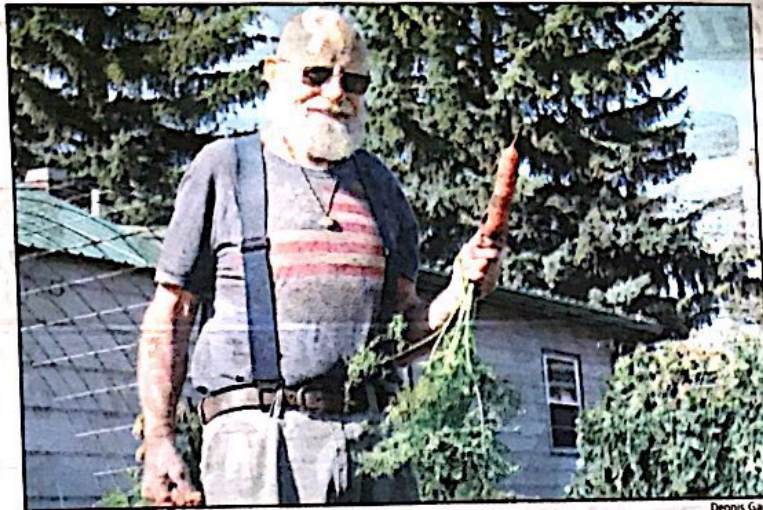
Meet Mike Barner, a retired sheet-metal worker and sheet-metal shop owner.

"I'm doing the same thing as my dad (who) was known as the onion man," the congenial 70-year-old said this week.

Everyone in Belgrade used to know Barner's father, nicknamed "Barney" Barner; his real name was Harold.

"He was the last single mailman," Barner said, referring to the senior Barner's responsibility for delivering mail to everyone in what was a typical compact Montana small town into the 1960s and early 1970s.

Mike Barner was born when his parents lived on a ranch along Springhill Road. When he turned 3, the Barners – Mike, his parents and a brother – moved to Belgrade. His father built a house in the central part of town where Mike still lives; his parents are deceased. As an elementary school student, one of Barner's teachers was Martha Heck, after whom a local school (Heck-Quaw) is partly named.



Dennis Gaub

While Belgrade resident Mike Barner is known for his onion growing prowess, he can also grow a mean carrot.

He started high school when it was housed at the older part of Heck-Quaw, on the west side of Broadway; when he was a sophomore, the then-brand-new high school on Hoffman Avenue opened and he finished there.

Barner said his father arranged to garden a couple acres of land on Flint Creek Road, off Dry Creek Road.

"That's where he started learning about onions and got connected to the people in Texas who raised onions," he said. Harold Barner opened an account with Dixondale Farms in the 1950s, and the Dixondale, Texas, company has been shipping onion bulks to Belgrade ever since.

Barner's onion crop this year was especially abundant. He showed varieties to a visitor that included:

- Alisa Craig, a large sweet onion similar to a Walla Walla
- Walla Walla
- Red River-Red Rings
- Red Marble
- Chippolini, a white Italian onion
- Candy
- Red Tropea, a Spanish onion

Barner raised 13 different onion varieties this year, along with leeks, shallots, celery, tomatoes, carrots and beets. He raised the Alisa Craig onions

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in the same raised bed with the beets and planted other onions in the carrot bed.

Barner also risked planting an apricot tree in his front yard about six years ago. Three years ago, the tree blossomed during an unseasonably warm April but frost nipped the blossoms.

It was warm and sunny on Monday when Barner displayed his harvest, but Montana's temperamental early fall weather – although no surprise to residents – left no room for complacency.

"I came out after the weather report (warning of frost) and covered my tomatoes," he said.

During the conversation, Barner periodically checked on a canning pot that was heating on his stove. He took up canning a few years ago, and the project of the moment was hot peppers. He said he also puts together a medley of fresh vegetables and cans them.

Still, onions are Barner's is known for. "I got one hellacious crop this year. I never saw onions like that before. It blew my mind," he said.