

# From Farm to Table: African Americans Return to Their Roots

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Whether a full garden or a planter box, growing your own food yields delicious results. (Photo by Chrystal Mincey)

The scent of lemongrass, sage, lavender, chocolate mint, basil, and other plants and herbs draws butterflies, hummingbirds, and deer to Alison Frazier Hayden's backyard. Living on Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts, a town on the island of Martha's Vineyard, since 2011, Hayden had no idea that a garden could grow in the North or make such an amazing and colorful backdrop in the shadows of her home.

"I heard stories about my grandparents and my father growing up on the farm, and I wanted to start eating healthier and organically," Hayden said. "My mother always had peppermint in our backyard in Philadelphia, so mint was the first herb that I started growing... it was a great way to start."

Hayden said she had a bit of a learning curve, but happily joined a growing number of African Americans returning to the land – even small swaths of soil – to farm their own harvests.

Research from McKinsey Institute for Black Economic Mobility found that while the role of the agriculture economy has grown, the share of Black farmers in the United States has declined over the last

century. Today, just 1.4 percent of farmers identify as Black or mixed race compared with about 14 percent 100 years ago. Additionally, with poor food choices contributing to gross disparities in Black health outcomes, increased numbers of African Americans are shifting cities into urban gardens.

The Black Urban Gardening Society based in Oklahoma City, which focuses on “sustainability in the Black community” has reported “easily” over 30,000 membership inquiries since the beginning of the pandemic. Gardening societies and clubs readily fill gaps created by a loss of Black foodways (traditions passed down usually orally, from parents and grandparents to new generations about growing, preparing, and storing foods). For Hayden, who found out the hard way about cold temperatures and the various plant species that thrive in shade and cooler temperatures, gardening clubs proved beneficial.



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Hayden said she supplemented her knowledge of gardening by volunteering at a local greenhouse when she arrived on the Oak Bluff, and her garden grew from what she learned there. In addition to using herbs and plants in her food and teas, she shares with family and friends who are welcome to pick the herbs from her garden.

“I assumed every plant needed full sun and 75- to 80-degree heat. Some plants and herbs thrive in the shade. Now, a lot of what I grow are perennials, meaning they grow back the next season unless the previous season was harsh.”

Similarly, Traci Cameron, 50, considered joining the field-to-fork movement as early as 2015, but took pause of the notion until life and COVID-19 reshaped life for many in the Atlanta area where she lives.

“The pandemic made us take that final leap and get it done. We grow year-round because our Atlanta climate allows for it. We wanted to eat fresher foods and not depend on an unsteady and potentially hazardous food supply,” Cameron told the *Informer*.

“By 2020, we also found gardening a way of spending time together safely as a family.”

Cameron said they do not sell anything, yet, but cook and give the excess to friends and family.

“We grow (have grown) a ton of stuff, including tomatoes, cucumbers, beans, zucchini, squash, sweet potatoes, potatoes, peppers, cabbage, collards, kale, lettuce, turnips, beets, a variety of herbs, apples, peaches, pears, blueberries, and grapes, so our grocery bills have seen a drastic reduction,” said Cameron.

Urban farming shows no gender preference either. Of the African American respondents to a recent study of gardeners by Purdue University (*Personal Gardens: Who is growing their own in the U.S.?*), a higher percentage of men (6.4 percent) than women (3.3 percent) reported growing produce of any kind in a personal garden not at home. Some African American men have returned to generations-old practices of living from the land in response to the “food apartheid” or food deserts plaguing urban communities. Roy Harrington,<sup>46</sup> an IT professional, counts among them.

For four years, the stay-at-home dad and Congress Heights, D.C.-resident has recreated the foodways of his grandparents.

“I learned from my grandparents in Pickens and Durant, Mississippi, who rarely ever made trips to grocers. They ate what they grew and

lived happier, healthier lives as a result,” Harrington told the *Informer*.

Harrington purchased a home and initially formed a garden to grow fresh herbs. He later added dietary staples including tomatoes and vegetables, before moving on to preserve pickles. Currently, his haul includes tomatoes, pickles, figs, and peppers.

“I realized that I could grow food year-round the way my grandparents did and am now building a hoop house that will give me more room for seedlings. What I do not use for myself and family, I give away at local farmers’ markets,” he said. “I think I will add some more next season. I am going to add more raised beds to grow watermelon out of a tire.”

Similarly, Mahdee Muhammad of Chicago Heights, Illinois, has been gardening for 16 years. He said he took the advice of a minister years ago to manage one’s life by controlling the source of nutrients going into the body.

“This minister talked about growing your own food and how it was better to eat for overall health. He talked about health disparities that plague African American communities and how many of them begin with food sources and preparations that exist outside of our control,” Muhammad said. “Once he opened my eyes, I noticed all of the wax that produce manufacturers put on vegetables before shipping to keep them fresh. I realized that I could grow my own food in small amounts and make a noticeable difference in the quality of foods my family and I consume.”