

Revolutionary Way to Solve Myriad Problems Associated with Food Deserts

Between the pandemic and the on-going #JusticeforGeorge protests, I continue to preach to people that the most important thing we can do to protect and empower ourselves is to return to our roots, which means what we have done for thousands of years: be responsible for growing our own food. I'm not saying protesting, even taking up arms isn't a good idea. They both are, but regardless whether it turns into an actual civil war or a revolution, we still have to eat and relying on a system that is discriminatory and oppressive, not to mention, crumbling before our eyes, will only hurt us.

In the United States, it is estimated that at least 23.5 million people live in what are sometimes referred to as '[food deserts](#).' Food deserts are defined as areas where access to fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy and wholesome foods is virtually non-existent.

Food deserts have very real, long-term consequences. According to [a study by the National Center for Biotechnology Information](#), people who live in neighborhoods where healthy foods are generally unavailable are 55 percent less likely to have a nutritionally adequate diet, compared to those who have access to good sources of important vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. This explains why people who live in locations where healthy food is plentiful have a 45 percent reduced risk of developing diabetes and other chronic conditions, over a five-year period.

While the government claims it is addressing a problem they were complicit in creating, there is a faster solution to the problem—and it doesn't matter whether you live in an apartment in the city, a house in the suburbs or a farm in the country. The problem with this solution is that it may involve considering a solution we've been conditioned to reject, because of our long history with it.

And believe me, I get why there is resistance to growing our own food. We have a long and sorted history with agriculture. We've been there, done that and many of our elders were either forced off their farms or they left by choice so they could move to more populated areas in search of jobs following the [industrial revolution](#). For many, the thought of returning to the land is seen as a step backward, when in fact it's about reclaiming what's yours: the right to basic necessities, even if our family and friends don't understand it or support us.

Gardening and Farming: An Old Idea That is Revolutionary

Sarah Ratliff and her husband know this dilemma all too well. After 20 years in corporate America—culminating with biotech giant, Amgen—they decided the path their Depression Era parents chose for them wasn't the one they wanted to continue pursuing. At the time they had what we're told from cradle to grave to strive for: well-paying jobs, a house in the suburbs with two cats, two cars, two motorcycles, two vacations a year and meals in fancy restaurants.

While this lifestyle is what we're raised to strive for, it came at a huge price tag for them. They both had multiple stress symptoms, including anxiety attacks, migraines and vestibular migraines (a.k.a. bouts of vertigo that lasted for days), intermittent numbness and others. In 2007 they decided they'd had enough and set a plan in motion to remove themselves from the all-consuming middle class and [buy a farm](#), so they could accomplish a few objectives:

- Get out of the stressful environment that Sarah's [doctor warned would prevent her from seeing her 45th birthday](#) (she was 40 and Paul was 44 at the time)
- Have better control over what they were putting in their bodies
- Be prepared in case of a food shortage

But when they told their friends and family about their plans, most told them they were making a big mistake. From their BiPoC friends, the criticism was sharper. One told them: "Our elders didn't leave the farm and get real jobs, competing with those who never wanted us there to begin with, so you could go back and play farmer."

As Sarah's husband explained it, "We understood the issue. My grandfather bought a farm in Mississippi, after slavery was abolished. He and my grandmother grew fruits and vegetables and raised animals. They also owned a general store, where my father and aunts split their time between helping to run it and work the farm. In those days they didn't call it organic, but they were using organic farming methods. As the area started changing and becoming more residential, many of the farms were being sold off. My father and aunts all left and went to college. My father went to school to become an engineer and then he and my mother settled in Washington, D.C., where my siblings and I were born.

"When I finished college, my parents wanted me to get a "real job," which was anything that involved working in an office with a salary that would guarantee a middle class lifestyle. I know they were looking out for me. They wanted to make sure I had a good job and could provide for myself. When I met Sarah and saw she too was raised the same way, and that she never wanted to be in the corporate world but live a much different lifestyle as well, we decided to leave our jobs, sell our house and buy a farm. My family didn't really get it, but they supported us. Our friends thought we were that move to Puerto Rico and within a few weeks or months, we'd regret it."

This was in 2007. It took them 10 months from planning to moving, but by the fall of 2008, they were in Puerto Rico looking for farmland.

Sarah continued, "And we get it. Our history with agriculture conjures up ugliness, but this isn't about going backward. It's about moving forward and taking back our power. It's about no longer being food dependent. It's about creating life and not destroying our planet. It's about caring for our bodies because what's in our food these days is causing too many chronic health conditions, especially in marginalized communities. It's also about making sure when the economy collapses, we're not starving—because nobody is going to look after us better than we can look out for ourselves. These are all harsh realities that will impact BiPoC, PoC and low-income the worst. While I think most of our friends and family didn't get why we did it 12 years ago, with the pandemic, fears of food scarcity and uncertainty about the future of the country, many have told us they now understood why we made the decisions we did 12 years ago."

Sarah and her husband cultivate a variety of fruits and vegetables from both temperate climates and [the tropics](#). They also raise goats for dairy and fertilizer, and they have chickens and ducks for eggs. (They're vegetarians.) Hurricane Maria, which destroyed 60 percent of their crops, was a wakeup call for them.

Although they continue to grow fruit, because they have a yield of approximately seven to eight years, in 2018, they added vegetables.

To their point, we do have a sorted history with agriculture, but [we also can't deny it's in our blood](#). We know [slaves were brought to the new world to work huge plantations](#) of cotton, sugar cane, tobacco, and other important crops, creating the obvious link between capitalism, slavery and colonialism. And while slave owners were successful at stripping us of our culture, our music, our language and religion, by continuing to keep us in the fields, our knowledge of farming never died.

Given the history with slavery, [indentured servitude](#), [sharecropping](#) and the fallacy of [40 Acres and a Mule](#), it's completely understandable why our brothers and sisters have zero interest in working the land, let alone the concept that farming is revolutionary and one of the only ways to ensure complete independence from institutionalized racism.

[Moving Passed the Stigma of Agriculture So We Can Take the Power Back](#)

Mason Olonade Trappio lives in Maryland. He received a Bachelors of Science degree in Physiology and Neurobiology from the University of Maryland. He went on to get a job as a researcher at University of Maryland.

How Mason got into agriculture is one of those serendipity things. He and his research team were invited to their boss's home for dinner. The boss's wife is Thai and she grew most of the ingredients to make the meal they ate. In particular Mason was interested in learning how to grow hot Thai peppers—in his Washington, D.C. apartment. Using what he knew about science and reading voraciously about how Nigerians and others throughout the continent grow food, he figured out a way to marry the two approaches. Today he's had success growing heirloom tomatoes, asparagus, corn and more—all in his apartment.

Today Mason has a [podcast called Jigijigi](#) about gardening and farming. Jìgìjìgì is an Afrikan-Centered podcast that seeks to encourage BiPoC and PoC to learn more about growing plants, food, soil, and their soul. Expect episodes to contain wisdom, tips, and actionable advice from Afrikan Agriculturalists thereby “blackening” your green-thumb.

Mason's podcast is for those who've gone past the initial stages of learning to farm. He assumes listeners know about soil types, why not to use RoundUp and why tilling should never be the first thing gardeners and farmers do.

“I'm not trying to compete with every gardener out there telling people about the basics of growing. I have a pretty specific worldview about farming that combines my science background with my African roots. Because of this, my podcast may be over the heads for those new to agriculture. It also won't appeal to anyone who hears the word Afrikan and assumes there will be nothing to offer them because it wasn't written, discussed, dissected or endorsed by a White person. I'm not trying to convince those who believe White people invented farming, and moreover, taught us about agriculture. We were growing, raising animals and using the [silk and spice trade](#) route between Black Africa, through the Middle East and into Asia. So, when we say it's in our blood, we mean that literally.”

Mason suggests for those new to planting and gardening, they check out podcasts that will help them get started. Here are a few:

[The Urban Farm Podcast](#)
[Earth Eats](#)
[Urban Farm U](#)

What you can learn listening to Mason's podcast is about [beekeeping in Egypt](#), [soil, bugs and why not to till the soil](#), farming in an [urban setting](#), a historical look at [composting](#), how to build [healthy soil](#), [microbes](#) and [much more](#).

It's Time to Take the Power Back

In these uncertain economic and political times, the only thing we can be sure of is that we don't know what's going to happen in the next six months, let alone years from now. Life may look very different and whether it mirrors a Mad Max film or where we'd be if the Black Panther Party hadn't been snuffed out by the FBI, we don't know. What we do know is that we have to feed ourselves before we start the revolution.