



# Landscapes of

# RESISTANCE

Few saved seeds come with a richer history than those being cultivated by American farmers reclaiming their roots through ancestral African crops.

By Owen Taylor

**I**F YOU WALK THROUGH the African Diaspora Garden of Sankofa Community Farm at Bartram's Garden in southwest Philadelphia, you'll pass towering black-eyed peas, climbing gourds, flowering sesame, 'Speckled Brown' butter beans, turnip greens, and more. *Sankofa* is a Twi word from the Akan people of Ghana that means "go back and get it." It's often associated with a phrase that translates to: "It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten." The Akan symbolize *sankofa* with a bird holding an egg in its mouth, looking backward while its feet face forward.

For Chris Bolden-Newsome, co-director of Sankofa Community Farm, turning to the past and seeking out, planting, and saving ancestral seeds from the African motherland and American South is a way to embody and practice this life-giving principle with his community. He explains, "I am a farmer and I am a descendant of farmers [...] so for me, it is absolutely crucial to grow African American and African diasporic crops as a way to keep my people together. When we grow these foods and share these seeds, we ensure



that important parts of our culture continue to live on.” Because of this effort, the young workers at Sankofa Community Farm can name their ancestral crops. They pray over these crops, they sometimes hold the seeds in their mouths before planting them, sing freedom songs over the earth while sowing, and they tell and retell the inspiring stories of the origins of crops and those who once sowed them.

### RESILIENT ROOTS

In *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American Culinary History in the Old South*, food historian Michael W. Twitty reminds us that black gardens have always been “landscapes of resistance.” He told me that every time enslaved Africans “planted something that reflected the flavors, tastes, preferences, or medicinal practices of the continent, what they were doing was asserting in some small way that they wouldn’t fall prey to the cultural genocide that walked alongside the physical traumas of slavery.” Having visited the slave castles of West Africa, he realized that every act of physical and cultural survival that happened for Africans after those suffocating dungeons, and their deadly trans-Atlantic Middle Passage toward uncertainty and permanent bondage, was a “complete miracle.” And yet they grew their gardens, carrying forward African crops as well as adopting new crops to provide the tastes of home.

Sweet potatoes replaced African yams; collards, turnips, and sweet potato leaves replaced a huge diversity of African greens; peppers and tomatoes served to enliven the flavor of bland and meager rations. This wasn’t new and wouldn’t end: For thousands of years before the slave trade, West and Central Africans were growing African and Eurasian crops in diverse polycultures, and those who survived the crossing to the Americas would continue to keep elements of their foodways after emancipation, the terror of the Jim Crow era, the mass exodus from the South, and into the present.

“So what are these uniquely black stories? What makes them a part of us?” Twitty asks, thinking of the moment he met and fell in love with the ‘Fish’ pepper. It was at a market mislabeled as “Thai Fish Pepper,” and, having a hunch it was part of his story, he told the pepper, “You don’t look Thai to me!”

*FROM LEFT: The ‘Speckled Brown’ butter bean, originally from South America, is now a traditional delicacy in the American South. In the late 1800s, white, unripe ‘Fish’ peppers were used by the black catering community in Baltimore to flavor seafood dishes. PAGE 70: Nykisha Madison of Urban Tree Connection tends to ‘Burgundy’ okra plants.*





## OWEN TAYLOR ON SAVING SEEDS

I started Truelove Seeds to support farmers who grow, share, and eat their cultural foods, and who build community self-sufficiency while producing and saving seeds. We began in 2017, partnered with several local Philadelphia farmers, and have grown in the past couple years to a network of about 25 urban and rural farms sharing over 125 cultivars of important heirloom seeds. Our biggest thrill is helping our customers, our growers, and ourselves reconnect and build deeper relationships with ancestral foods that grow well and taste like home.

Support our mission and our farmers by growing your own seed stories at [www.TrueloveSeeds.com](http://www.TrueloveSeeds.com).

Peppers — like tomatoes, corn, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, beans, and peanuts — were first domesticated by indigenous people throughout the Americas, but were brought over and naturalized in many parts of Africa beginning around the 16th century. How this particular variegated hot pepper cultivar found its way into the crab and oyster sauces made by the black catering community of Baltimore, Maryland in the late 1800s is not known. In the 1940s, African American painter Horace Pippin traded 'Fish' peppers for bee sting therapy from H. Ralph Weaver. Decades later, Weaver's grandson, Dr. William Woys Weaver, unearthed the frozen seeds in a labeled baby food jar and continued the legacy. This pepper is now being grown and used for hot sauces in the Washington, D.C. and surrounding Maryland areas again. It is the Maryland black farmers and gardeners of Soilful City who provide the 'Fish' pepper seeds for our Truelove Seeds catalog.

### SAVING SOUL FOOD

Leah Penniman is one of the founders and visionaries of Soul Fire Farm in Grafton, New York — a farm committed to ending racism and injustice in the food system. Part of that work is growing African diasporic foods for her community. "When we grow these foods, it's like an 'I love you' to our community. When folks see that there's okra or sorrel in their CSA program box, there's an 'I see you' moment that happens because of the cultural resonance. Our folks need a big hug, and that can be in the form of holding onto the crops that matter to us. Okra hates New York, but we love it!"

In her recently published book *Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land*, Penniman describes a family legend from around 1800 in which her grandmother's grandmother's grandmother was kidnapped from the shores of West Africa with seeds of rice, okra, and millet braided into her hair as insurance for an unimaginable future. While the literal seeds of her African foodways weren't passed down directly, Penniman is finding her ancestral foods everywhere. While living in Mexico and learning from indigenous people in the highlands of Oaxaca, a Triqui farmer named Josephino Martinez gave her a bundle of seeds from his milpa — an intercrop of corn, beans, squash, chiles, and black-eyed peas. Black-eyed peas are a quintessential West

OWEN TAYLOR (4)





African crop that enslaved Africans exchanged with Native Americans for their squash, pumpkins, chiles, and tomatoes. "This speaks to black-indigenous solidarity; it speaks to the way that all of our stories weave together, and that all our seeds have stories of cultural survival and exchange."

For decades, Ira Wallace has been writing and curating the well-respected Southern Exposure Seed Exchange heirloom seed catalog in the rolling hills of central Virginia. As a black woman whose work is to tell the story of Southern food, she wants her legacy project to include sharing black food histories and supporting black farmers. In terms of African American foodways, she believes Southern peas don't get the respect they deserve. Her family would grow many different kinds: smaller 'Lady' peas that were quick to cook, and larger ones, such as 'Big Red Ripper' that cooked really well into Hoppin' John, a classic Southern dish consisting mainly of cowpeas, rice, pork, and onions.

"I want to tell gardeners: Here's something you can use to build your soil as well as provide nutrition for your family. Look at how versatile they are: You can have them fresh in summer; you can have them dried; you can make these great stews; and, like sweet potatoes, you can keep them in the kitchen without a fancy storage area for them in the winter." In this, Wallace echoes the work of George Washington Carver, who promoted cowpeas for fixing atmospheric nitrogen in the soil and for good eating. In a recipe bulletin he published in 1903, he wrote, "We must admit that the plant is yet to be found that furnishes as much nutritious and palatable food as the cowpea for both man and beast."

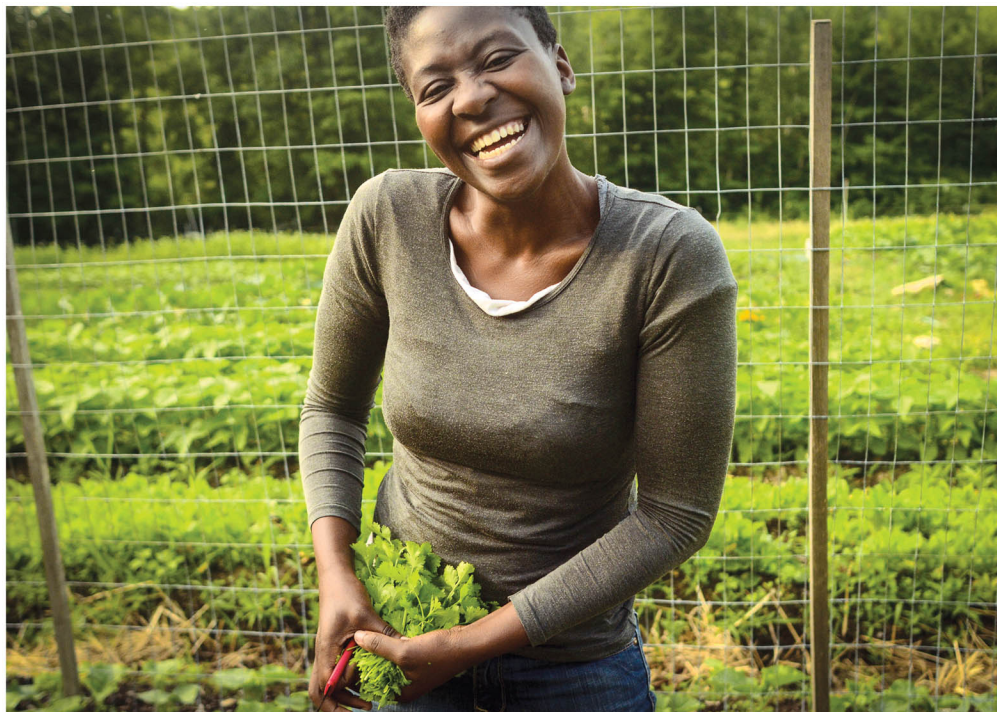
Wallace points to loss of farmland and migration to northern cities as major factors in the disconnect of farmers from traditional and healthy foods, such as black-eyed peas and collard greens. Fourteen percent of U.S. farmland was owned by black farmers in 1910, compared with less than 2 percent now. Six and a half million black people fled the rural South because of lynchings, segregation, denial of farm loans, and campaigns of terror that kept them from registering to vote. The Northern cities pulled people in with promises of work, housing, and a better life. Before this migration, Wallace figures most black people had some direct connection to a farm or garden, yet once internally displaced, everyday farm-fresh food and home cooking became holiday food only for these refugees.

FROM PAGE 72, LEFT:  
'Sea Island' red peas are a popular cultivar for Southern dishes, such as Hoppin' John. Amirah Mitchell grows the 'Green-Striped' cushaw squash in part because it was beloved by her great-grandfather. Chris Bolden-Newsome not only grows ancestral seeds, such as the 'Speckled Brown' butter bean, but also teaches his young workers the origins of each crop. Egusi melons are primarily grown for their seeds, which may be turned into flour, a peanut-butter-like paste, or oil.





Beatrice Anderson harvests culturally significant crops during an immersion program now called BIPOC FIRE (Black-Indigenous-People-of-Color Farming in Relationship with Earth) at Soul Fire Farm.



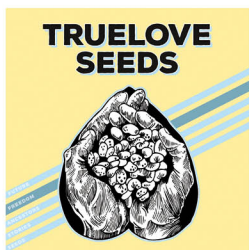
Today, through the work of programs, such as Sankofa Community Farm and Soul Fire Farm, young black Americans are reconnecting with their food culture through growing traditional foods, keeping seeds, telling stories, relearning planting and harvesting rituals, and having hands and hearts in the soil.

#### A CULTURE CARRIES ON

At Truelove Seeds, each gardener grows crops that connect with their ancestral story. I grow many Italian and Irish varieties; Zoe grows Polish peas; Julia is getting to know chochos (an Ecuadorian lupine); Althea grows sea kales from the beaches of the British Isles; and second-year apprentice Amirah Mitchell continues to grow all sorts of African diasporic crops, such as field peas, okra, watermelon, egusi melon, bambara groundnuts, peanuts, sweet potatoes, moringa trees, and rice. To her, learning about West African rice cultivation feels like reconnecting with family. Her mom always had a bowl of rice on the table, and she said that learning from *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* by Judith Carney “that there were people in Senegambia who didn’t eat a single meal without rice on the table – same way I do – made me feel great, and so that was one of the first crops I became interested in growing and saving seeds from.”

It was *The Cooking Gene* that inspired Mitchell to dig deeper into her own family history. In addition to archival research, Twitty emphasizes how oral family history and the wonders of DNA testing can now provide direct links to specific tribes, specific ships, and living relatives. Mitchell has found a potent family food connection through simply talking to elders and recreating recipes. For example, at her grandmother’s funeral, her great-aunt told her about her great-grandfather’s love for the striped, crookneck cushaw squash and the custard dessert he’d make from it down in North Carolina. Mitchell grew the squash, saved the seeds, and made a pie from it to serve at the next Thanksgiving, which happened to fall on her grandmother’s birthday.

She grew up in Boston, but all of Mitchell’s grandparents are from the southeastern United States, and she feels the South calling her home, because, while it’s a place that “represents the traumatic experience of enslavement, it also represents a place where African Americans were resilient and survived.” Eventually, she plans to have an African diasporic seed farm there. Like those who came before her, her feet are planted facing forward, and she’s looking back with a seed in her mouth. 🌱



Owen Taylor is a seed keeper, farmer, and founder of Truelove Seeds. Find him @SeedKeeping on Instagram, and peruse truly loved seeds and more at [www.TrueloveSeeds.com](http://www.TrueloveSeeds.com).