



**FREEDOM’S SEEDS:
 REFLECTIONS OF FOOD, RACE, AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
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Voices of the food movement in Detroit

Published online March 2, 2017

Citation: White, M. M. (2017). Voices of the food movement in Detroit. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 7(2), 5–7. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2017.072.009>

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Growing food in Detroit says...I can grow my own food and I can feed my community. The first step to rebuilding a culture is agriculture.
 —Tee, Detroit urban gardener

Tee is a mother of four, born and raised in Detroit. She became an urban gardener one day in 2009 when she decided to take her

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lawnmower to a nearby abandoned, vacant lot filled with chest-high weeds and turn it into a community garden. Once she had cleared the space, she went door to door inviting neighbors to meet up to co-create a beautiful space. Where once pedestrians had crossed the street to avoid walking by a lot that seemed sinister, during the growing season it is now inviting, filled with fresh fruits and vegetables such as kale, tomatoes, collards, onions, watermelon, and zucchini the community grows. They also grow flowers, including lavender. Music can be heard while neighbors work in the garden, and artists are hard at work painting signs, building compost bins, and creating other garden decorations that together make this a community space.

The project has always involved Tee’s four children and other children of the neighborhood; she sees their role in the project as crucial. While their parents did the heavy lifting in making the space ready, the neighborhood children played a primary role in determining what the garden would

grow. As she told me, it was more than a garden plan. Tee has used the garden to show children the “power of their own voice.” As she says,

To ask children their opinion in designing something that’s a fixture in a community, that’s powerful. Their faces are illuminated when they see the results: “I wanted the tomatoes there and they’re there!” That’s empowering. I want children to know that they are powerful. They are in the position to change things and they are worthy of being heard.

As many of us know, the current urban agriculture movement of which Tee’s garden is a part treats agriculture as a strategy not only to provide healthy and affordable food, but also to rebuild communities and to create sustainable, community-based food systems. By creating spaces for inter-generational exercise and interaction, they make an investment in their children’s confidence and hope for the future. Such gardens also demonstrate social, political, and economic agency.

There is a rich history of urban agriculture in Detroit, and yet this most recent moment has arisen in response to the ongoing decline of the automobile industry and the mass outmigration of Detroit’s population. City services have been drastically reduced, impeding the path to a healthy and sustainable lifestyle in the city its residents

love. Even before the 2009 financial crisis, the last major chain grocery store closed its doors to Detroit residents in 2007. For people like Tee, this created the perfect storm for action.

This movement does not demand a new major chain grocery store to extract further resources from Detroit. They did not petition public officials to provide shopping venues, having no expectation that they would succeed if they did. Instead, they returned to the agricultural traditions of many of their ancestors. Black Detroiters, by and large, are descendants of the migrants of the Great Migration, who came to Detroit seeking a better life working in the burgeoning automobile industry. Thus, putting their hands in the dirt to transform their community, reconnecting to agriculture, one growing space at a time, constitutes a return to their roots. They understand the truth of what an Alabama farmer whose family has farmed for generations told me: “You can free yourself when you can feed yourself.”

As Tee described her commitment to transforming the neighborhood, for her children and for all of the people in the neighborhood, the sincerity of her vision of a healthy community brought us both to tears. Like Tee, I grew up in Detroit. But I’ve lived primarily in college towns since my high school graduation. As grocery stores have dwindled and my aging parents have had to drive further and further from their home to access healthy food, college towns have offered a stark contrast.

Yet I have always understood that food is more than a commodity. My father always grew food in Detroit. My grandmother did too; even when confined to a wheelchair and lacking a yard, she tended to her tomato plants inside. My sister Ava continued the tradition, growing corn, eggplant, collards, and all sorts of other crops in her small back yard on the East Side of Detroit.

My family has always understood working with the earth to be a way to practice self-sufficiency. Tee spoke of the earth as a powerful ally in community transformation. She recognizes that the dominant food system does not offer families like hers access to healthy, affordable, locally grown, culturally appropriate food. As the urban agriculture movement has gained ground, media coverage



Tee in the “Sowin’ Seeds” community garden.

Photo by Monica M. White

of urban farmers has focused on “pioneering” and “intrepid” young white people who are supposedly breaking new ground in the city; I did not recognize my grandmother, father, my sister, or Tee, in these images. For my family and thousands of others, clearing a field and growing food is thus an act of resistance, a protest moment, and an opportunity to demonstrate our own self-reliance in a mainstream culture that at best ignores us. Tee reclaimed her own agency and empowered her community from the youngest members on up by reclaiming a space once treated as a garbage dump, and creating a symbol of the strength and resilience of the community.

In this column, “Freedom’s Seeds: Reflections of Food, Race, and Community Development,” I will introduce you to people who, like Tee, demonstrate that the acts of growing food and reconnecting with the environment are a strategy of freedom and liberation, of self-determination, and of self-sufficiency. Growing food allows community members to reclaim spaces for community needs and community wellness as a demonstration of collective agency and community resilience.

I’ve been involved in the food justice and food sovereignty movement for over a decade, and in that time I have spoken to many people like Tee. I am also assistant professor of environmental justice and teach at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, with a joint appointment in the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies and the Department of

Community and Environmental Sociology. From 2011 to 2016 I served as president of the board of directors of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. As both an activist and an academic, I have cherished the opportunity to study generational farmers and urban agricultural activists from various vantage points. The chance to describe in this column how communities participate in food production and other strategies of community-based food systems and the amazing people who make up these communities gives me great joy.

While sociologists and historians have often examined agriculture as a force of oppression of African Americans, under slavery, tenant farming, and sharecropping, this space will celebrate those who participate in agriculture as a pathway to freedom. It will be dedicated to unearthing the voices of those who have engaged in agriculture as a way to resist, rebuild, and improve their lives and those of others around them. Here you will find stories about Black generational farmers, young urban farmers, and others who are engaged in urban agriculture as a way to create healthy food options and develop sustainable communities around food.

I’m hoping that what you read here now and in coming columns will both challenge what you think and inform you about the relationships between race, farming, community development, and the environment.

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