

Organic produce, recycling and soon an environmental Web gig, farmer Daron Joffe is ...

A GROWING BUSINESS

By KATIE LESLIE / kleslie@ajc.com

Savannah

If you ask Daron "Farmer D" Joffe, he's more than a farmer, he's an agricultural consultant. Or, as his friends joke, an "entre-manure."

Maybe that explains the calls he endlessly fields on his iPhone while shoveling his own line of compost, plucking his sought-after organic produce or doing interviews with visiting reporters.

His Farmer D Organics brand, based in Savannah, is on the lips and in the gardens of the elite. Billionaire entrepreneur Sir Richard Branson wants him to develop an organic farm at his exclusive New Jersey spa. Actress Jennifer Garner thinks his turnips "rock." Rolling Stones' keyboardist Chuck Leavell and Atlanta adman Joel Babbit just signed him to a deal on their environmental Web site, Mother Nature Network.

Whole Foods markets sell Farmer D's compost through a partnership in which Joffe (and colleague Mike Smith of Longwood Plantations) recycles the chain's scraps into rich organic matter. Oh, and he's inspired thousands of people across the country to grow organic food through his work with nonprofits and community gardens.

Just 32, Joffe could be considered the Ty Pennington of organic gardening. It's the kind of success few farmers sow their seeds for, but Joffe, born in South Africa and raised in Sandy Springs, says it's not all about the potential money and fame.

"This isn't just another thing for corporate America to cash into," Joffe says of organic's growing chic. "It's not just a trend. It's a true paradigm shift. It's about sustainability and social justice, not just about the rich having access."

Modest roots

This organic biodynamic guru works to inspire people to garden in a sustainable, eco-friendly way, he said, a mission

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Photos by Stephen Morter

Daron "Farmer D" Joffe examines the okra crop at Harvest Barn at Hampton Island. His Farmer D Organics is headquartered in Savannah.

As he expands his interests, Joffe will be wearing many hats. For now, his straw one comes in handy to playfully show off his organic produce.



he began developing a dozen years ago as a dreadlocked, overall-wearing "Deadhead" farmer in Wisconsin.

Then in his early 20s, Joffe was intrigued by remnants of the 1960s back-to-the-land movement. So with a catchy nickname given by his mother and a couple of organic farming apprenticeships under his belt, he bought a 175-acre farm and ran a pizza and falafel joint in Madison for extra cash.

He later managed a farm in San Francisco, teaching horticulture to incarcerated youth. By age 25, he'd moved back to Georgia to start a nonprofit, Gan Chaim (Hebrew for Garden of Life), and develop educational organic gardens for universities and residential communities alike, such as Serenbe in Palmetto.

Joffe is vice-president of Georgia Organics, a nonprofit promoting locally grown organic food. And Farmer D Organics, the product and consulting company he founded in 2003, is on track to break six figures in revenue this year.

"He brings a pretty amazing entrepreneurial spirit to our movement," said Alice Rolls, executive director of Georgia Organics. "Farmer D seizes the opportunities before him, the things before all of our eyes that we're not able to see, but he puts two and two together."

Riding the mainstream

But just how does a small-time farmer become a rock star? Here's a lesson from Joffe's tale:

➤ You pay your dues in a decade of tilling soil and planting for everyone from the homeless to prison sys-



Daron Joffe was born in South Africa, raised in Sandy Springs, educated in Wisconsin and managed a farm in San Francisco, where he also taught horticulture.

Photos by Stephen Morton

tems, nonprofits and world-class gardens.

➤ You maintain your 20-something, change-the-world optimism, but learn how to make a living at it.

➤ You convert a lifeless field into a million-dollar farm at the exclusive private community Hampton Island Preserve off coastal Georgia, guaranteeing exposure to the wealthy.

➤ You travel effortlessly from the vegetable patch to the board room, even while wearing flip-flops and your stinky brim straw hat.

➤ You throw in a dash of exoticism with biodynamic agriculture, conversing about the spirituality of farming and the earth as a living organism.

➤ It doesn't hurt to be a hottie.

➤ Most importantly, you go organic long before organic becomes cool.

"For 10 years of doing this ... you had

to prove what you do is valid," Joffe said. "But for the past five years, it's been different. People buy into it and I don't have to sell it. To see it come on mainstream is refreshing."

But where the mainstream goes, corporate America follows. Joffe has been approached by real estate developers seeking to cash in on his cachet with brand partnerships, a tempting offer for a guy who says he used to beg bank officers for farm loans. He's heard pitches for projects ranging from branded farmers markets to cosmetics to pet foods.

In every case, Joffe says, he follows his gut. He says he partners only with those who share his values, and wants any project he's part of to have a "social, environmental and sustainable" component, such as making use of waste materials or helping provide jobs.

"I definitely don't want to put my name on things I don't believe in," he said. "That's all I have, my integrity and my name."

From soil to stardom?

And that's a name soon to be splashed across Mother Nature Network, the Atlanta-based environmental Web site launching this fall. Joffe is one of a handful of "green" personalities who'll



You can almost taste the wonderful dishes that will be made from these colorful, enticing vegetables from Joffe's Harvest Barn on Hampton Island.

do weekly video features on earth-friendly topics.

Babbitt, who with Leavell heads Mother Nature Network, said Joffe's knowledge and looks will appeal to viewers. And between his South African roots and signature hat, "he's got all the makings of a Hollywood star."

While Joffe doesn't discount making a buck, he insists stardom isn't on his to-do list. Rather, when facing criticism of his work for exclusive private communities such as Hampton Island, vacation site of Garner and Ben Affleck, the farmer says it's about getting face time with folks who can make social change faster — not to leverage the green trend for cash.

"I'm not selling out. ... Money was never the motivating factor, and it's not now," he said. "This is what I do, this is what I believe in."



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In Savannah, Joffe checks on okra plants at historic Trustees Garden, which he has been helping to rejuvenate.

DIGGING DEEPER WITH FARMER D

- Currently reading: "In Defense of Food" by Michael Pollan
- On his radio/iPod: Damian Marley, Refugee All Stars, Bob Marley.
- Wishes he could grow: Avocados, papayas and hemp
- Favorite meal: A collard burrito
- Pets: Jonah and Sheva. Bernese mountain dogs
- Other talents: Playing the djembe (an African drum), soccer, ping-pong
- Guilty pleasure: Waffle House. ("But I've been known to bring my own eggs.")
- Next on his plate: A new business launching this month in Atlanta that will install and maintain or provide materials for residential organic vegetable gardens.
- For more information: www.farmerd.com

FOR MORE ON SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

- Georgia Organics, www.georgiaorganics.org
- Local Harvest, www.localharvest.org
- Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, www.sswag.org
- National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, www.sustainableagriculture.net



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