

## **The Farmer D history**

What started out as a curiosity to grow a sandwich from scratch has turned into a passionate career in sustainable farming and social justice. The journey began at the University of Wisconsin, Madison where Farmer D stumbled upon a Biodynamic Farming seminar at the Michael Fields Institute and was introduced to the spiritual values and philosophies behind Rudolf Steiner and Biodynamic Farming. This led Farmer D to his first apprenticeship at the Prairie Dock Farm in Watertown, WI in 1995, where he studied permaculture, organic farming, sustainable building and Community Supported Agriculture. Greg David, Farmer D's mentor at the time was pioneering chicken tractor designs, prairie restoration, free-range pigs for plowing and turning compost, straw-bale housing and other innovative sustainable approaches to agriculture and ecology.

After an 8-month intensive apprenticeship at Prairie Dock and near purchase of a 50-acre Amish farm with his farming partner, Farmer D headed off to Santa Cruz, CA to deepen his knowledge in a new climate and epicenter for organic agriculture. While living on a beautiful ranch in Santa Cruz, Farmer D started a vibrant biodynamic garden and lived in a converted chicken coop overlooking the ocean. When not working in the garden or reading books, Farmer D was volunteering at The Homeless Garden Project, the UCSC student farm and toured dozens of farms in the Santa Cruz countryside.

From there Farmer D drove back across the country to begin his second apprenticeship at Union Agricultural Institute (UAI), Hugh Lovel's Biodynamic Farm in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Blairsville, GA. At UAI, Farmer D managed the 80-family CSA and became an avid cheese maker as he was milking cows and goats by hand daily and making biodynamic raw milk cheese, yogurt and cultured butter.

After 8 months of working on the farm at UAI, Farmer D made a spontaneous visit to Wisconsin that would change his life forever. The idea to visit came after teaching a biodynamic compost workshop at The Barefoot Farmer's annual conference in Red Boiling Springs, Tennessee. Farmer D and his parents went camping in Kentucky on a friend's biodynamic farm and while there, his parents handed him a letter from a friend that had been sitting at the house for weeks. The letter was an invitation to a Harvest Party at Gathering Places the next night! Farmer D knew he would be able to surprise and see many of his closest farming friends from up there who he had not seen in over a year. Little did he know that six months later he would be buying a fertile 175-acre farm nestled in the Kickapoo Valley 6 miles from Viroqua and LaFarge, Wisconsin.

The farm was named Earthsong Community Farm and in the first year fed over 50 CSA families and supplied some of the top restaurants in the Chicago and Madison area, including the Ritz Carlton, LeToile and many others.

In 1998, the same year Hugh Lovel was awarded Biodynamic Farmer of the Year, Farmer D won the Rookie Biodynamic Farmer of the Year Award by the American Biodynamic Association. Earthsong was a vibrant farm with over 15 people living and working there. In addition to growing food, raising animals and teaching children from the local Waldorf School, Farmer D launched a frozen organic pizza business, which provided hot food to the Waldorf School one day a week and became a popular item in the Madison area café's and coops. To expand the pizza business, Farmer D purchased a Falafel Cart in downtown Madison and began supplying his new restaurant business with farm fresh organic veggies and pizzas.

The Falafel Cart enabled Farmer D to support the farm through the winter and created an urban venue to connect with students, faculty and the greater Madison area. It was at this time that his focus shifted from market farming to educating children in urban areas about where their food comes from and why it is important to eat local and grow your own. He joined the board for the Children's Gardening Network, who worked closely with Growing Power in Milwaukee, MACSAC (Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition) and CFSC (Community Food

Security Coalition).

While living and working in Madison, the farm rented out to a friend, Farmer D helped F.H. King, the sustainable agriculture club on campus to start an organic demonstration and education farm. He had to pull out of school years before because there was no program at UW in sustainable agriculture and wanted to help start one so others like him could stay in school and pursue a career in organic farming. The club's garden was a huge success and is still growing ten years later!

The next major change in Farmer D's journey occurred at an FH King conference where Mohammed Nuru, the Executive Director of The San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners (SLUG) at the time was giving a presentation. Before and after his talk, Farmer D had a chance to talk with Mr. Nuru in great detail about how this innovative social justice urban gardening non-profit worked. Farmer D was fascinated and intrigued and Mr. Nuru was so impressed with his questions and interest that he recruited Farmer D to San Francisco to help grow the organization. Within 6 months, Farmer D had sold his farm and falafel cart and moved to San Francisco to launch an organic farm at a youth correctional facility called Log Cabin Ranch in La Honda, CA an hour south of San Fran.

There, Farmer D taught youth detainees and felons between the ages of 15-20 in horticulture and landscaping vocational training with an emphasis on organic food production. The food grown at the prison was donated to the inmate's families and the vegetable starts grown in the greenhouses were used in over 200 community gardens in San Francisco. It was a very successful program and a great learning experience about non-profit management, social justice, food security and working with at-risk youth.

While running the farm at Log Cabin, Farmer D was also assisting with tractor work at gardens throughout the city and helped launch a Biodynamic Commercial Compost project called Urban Earth. After one year of running the farm and assisting Urban Earth and other SLUG projects, Farmer D was ready to return home to Atlanta to reconnect with his family and help grow the organic farming movement in the South. Upon his return he enrolled in University again with the goal of studying Landscape Architecture and Ecology with an emphasis on edible gardens and agriculture. While in Atlanta, he launched his non-profit Gan Chaim by creating a garden at the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta that was voted the #1 activity at camp that summer by the 700+ campers. He also received a prestigious fellowship grant called Joshua Venture that instantly launched the Atlanta based non-profit to the national stage.

Over the next few years, while in school at the University of Georgia, Farmer D started dozens of gardens and farms at Jewish summer camps and retreat centers from Malibu to Connecticut. At the same time, Farmer D started Full Moon Coop, an organic CSA and research farm for UGA's agroecology professor Carl Jordan. The farm has been a huge success and continues to operate 8 years later under the umbrella of the Spring Valley Eco Farm non-profit. The farm provides classes in organic farming and ecology to both undergraduate and postgraduate students at UGA.

Farmer D experienced a work overload, as he was a full-time landscape architecture and ecology student, managing the Full Moon Farm and serving as the founding executive director of his national non-profit Gan Chaim.

At this point, he went to Dean Crowley, UGA's dean of the school of environmental design, and asked for advice. His advice was to pull out of school and pursue the opportunities at hand. Not only that, but also to go check out a place called Serenbe, where he believed Farmer D's services could be of assistance.

One year later, after ignoring the Dean's suggestion due to work overload, Farmer D found himself at Serenbe volunteering for a Georgia Organics fundraiser. It was there that Farmer D, in

search of a bathroom, stumbled into a presentation by Steve Nygren, Serenbe's founder and visionary. After an exciting conversation about the idea of incorporating an organic farm into the community's master plan it was clear that Farmer D had just found his next big project. Over the next three years Farmer D worked tirelessly to turn a depleted clay field into a vibrant working organic farm. Serenbe Farms continues to provide high quality organic produce to the community's many residents, restaurants and visitors.

During this time Farmer D became the Vice President of Georgia Organics and Chair of the Agriculture Committee for the Chattahoochee Hill Country. He continues to serve on the executive committee for Georgia Organics and is very active in the sustainable agriculture, food security and local food movement.

While serving on the Georgia Organics board, Farmer D met two people who would become key partners in the years to come. One was Mike Smith of Longwood Plantation, a talented engineer and composter, the other Alex Rilko, the Southern Region Produce Purchasing Team Leader for Whole Foods Market. Mike asked Farmer D if he would be interested in marketing his high-quality compost under the Farmer D brand. Intrigued by the idea, Farmer D turned to Alex and asked him what Whole Foods was currently doing with all their food waste. The answer, "throwing it in the garbage", but we want to compost it. The seed was planted and over the next two years, the three of them worked hard to create the Farmer D Organics Biodynamic Blend Organic Compost, made with the spoils from Whole Foods market. The product is sold at Whole Foods markets throughout the Southeast. Farmer D continues to work with Whole Foods and other companies to redirect their food waste from the landfill, to compost facilities and ultimately back to the earth where it belongs.

While managing Serenbe Farms and directing Gan Chaim, Farmer D was approached by a developer out of Savannah to create a world class farm for Hampton Island, a 4000-acre resort style community in Riceboro, GA. Over the next 6 months, Farmer D trained and hired a farm manager to take over Serenbe Farms and moved to Savannah to begin work turning a 13-acre field of muck, or gumbo as it is called, into a fertile, productive and beautiful working organic farm. For the next three years, Hampton Island served as Farmer D's base of operations and the farm was written up in numerous articles as the showpiece and favorite amenity of Hampton Island.

While living in Savannah, Farmer D began to see a need to support the local organic farmers in the area as well as the lack of fresh food in the low-income areas of downtown. Two projects surfaced that gave Farmer D the idea to apply for a CSREES Community Food Project Grant to connect low-income families with small limited-resource organic farmers. The "Planting Community" grant is a partnership between Farmer D Organics and Union Mission and has been a great success so far.

One of the primary garden sites for the grant is the Trustees Garden, which is the oldest public agricultural experimentation garden in the U.S. Farmer D was hired to help recreate this garden as an organic urban education farm. In doing so, he also developed a farmers market in an old warehouse, which enabled the participants in the grant to access fresh organic food from local farmers. The grant participants were guided through the market by a chef learning how to select and combine fresh fruits and vegetables and were then given a culinary class there at the market. After the class, they used their \$15/week gift certificate to purchase produce from the farmers. In addition, paid youth interns learned about the business of farming and helped Farmer D with the gardens at Trustees and in the other gardens throughout Savannah.

Another garden Farmer D is helping develop is in a 30-acre sustainable affordable housing development called Fellwood, which is being developed by Melaver, a green developer based in Savannah. Farmer D's work in Savannah was recognized by the City of Savannah's Economic Development Authority winning the Spirit of Innovation award as the "Most Sustainable Business", while also being nominated in the "Best Emerging Business" category as well.

Farmer D also received a Fast Pitch award from Savannah's Creative Coast, which gave him the opportunity to present a 3-minute pitch to almost 200 angel investors. Farmer D continues to work closely with a number of projects in the Savannah area, including helping two restaurants, Cha Bella and Local 1110 to develop organic farms to provide fresh local organic food for their recipes.

In late 2008, Farmer D was approached by a new environmental news website company called Mother Nature Network about being one of their experts on organic farming and gardening. They asked him to do a video TV series that provided their viewers with valuable insights into organics. Farmer D agreed and found himself in front of the camera getting his passionate message out to the masses. With a product line in Whole Foods, a national Web TV series and a mission of getting more people growing their own food, Farmer D realized it was time to use his farmerd.com website to reach more people and offer his services and products to a larger audience. With an average of almost 30,000 hits/month on his site and the likelihood of a substantial increase with MNN getting ready to launch he decided to invest in a new website with an online store focused on organic gardening products.

Little did he know, this idea would lead him to opening a retail organic garden center so he would have a base to operate his new online store. This decision led him back to Atlanta, where his family owns a boutique eco-friendly car wash, which he helped start when he was 13 years old. That's another story we will leave out for the time being. With the economy going through a hard time and people going out of business and losing jobs, Farmer D gathered his courage and started a new business. He believed that his business vision of helping people grow their own food at home would be well-received in these hard times as the return on investment for a home garden can actually be a money-saver. In addition, with people traveling less, they are looking for meaningful activities to do at home that have health benefits for the whole family.

Farmer D Organics flagship organic garden center was born in the retail space of his father's car wash in a prime location across the street from a Whole Foods and Starbucks near Emory Village in Atlanta. This became the new base of operations, where Farmer D's vision for creating urban gardens all over Atlanta began. Farmer D's father, Stan is a talented wood-worker and began working with D to design and build a wide-range of raised beds made of sustainably harvested Cedar. The goal is to provide people who want to grow their own food with a complete package including a raised bed, organic soil, drip irrigation, seeds, plants and guidance. The target audience for Farmer D's "Gardens to Go" is homeowners, schools, community gardens, restaurants and more.