

the plot.



community food growing news

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Detroit
farmers
write!

Once upon a time Detroit was a thriving city centre and home to both the motor and music industries game changing players. During the 50's and 60's they dominated their specific fields of play. Nicknamed the Motor City and Motown, Detroit was the home to the "Big Three" US automobile companies Ford, General Motors and Chrysler and the music powerhouse Motown Records.

Detroit had all of the ingredients for industrial growth, it soon became a global symbol of modernity and of the power of American capitalism and the labour that built it. At one time Detroit had over 120 auto companies situated there and some of them were the largest private employers of African Americans in the US. To this day Detroit has the highest ratio of Black people compared to other US cities, with around 80% of its residents African American.

Competition in the motor industry saw a serious decline in Detroit which forced many motor companies and small businesses to down size, relocate or ultimately close down, and with Motown Records also relocating to Los Angeles in the 70s some would say Detroit lost its "Soul".

There was a mass migration of people who could afford to who up'd and left the D, moving to the suburbs or other cities.

The city has lost over 60% of its population since 1950, the departure of middle class whites left the African American community in control of a city suffering from an inadequate tax base, job shortages, and inflated welfare rolls. As part of an "urban renewal" project, motorway construction cut through the most densely populated black neighbourhoods. The demolition and physical barriers caused by the freeways further split and reduced these once thriving areas. The obliteration of the community with little warning or effort on the part of the city to provide housing assistance was catastrophic for the African American inhabitants.

The D has been described by some as a "ghost town", where you find tens of thousands of abandoned buildings, vacant lots and unlit streets. While some of the abandoned buildings have become hubs for drugs, arson, and other crime... some parts of the city are so abandoned they have been described as looking like farmland or even completely wild.

To make matters worse Detroit is also running out of money. This dilemma has been developing for decades and has reached the point where immediate action was necessary just to keep the city running. In March 2013, Governor Rick Snyder declared a financial emergency in the city. The financial review team said it had no plan in

place to fix the problem, stating that the city has a \$327 million budget deficit and faces more than \$14 billion in long-term debt.



On the
eve
of All
Hallows
Eve I
wake to

experience my
first morning in the

D. I later come to find
out that in fact I was staying
in an area known as Highland

Park, a city which is completely surrounded by Detroit. On paper it was a city within its own right, but most people whom I spoke with who were from there said... "This is Detroit... the people you see working

and moving through here are from the D". Highland Park began as a small farming community in the early 1800s, and although the land scape has gone through significant changes from then to now, it was interesting to see that in 2014 Highland Park whether "by choice or force" still housed a "small farming community".

As mentioned previously Detroit is a city with hundreds of acres of abandoned, derelict, and ruined space, Detroiters are fighting back with one of the country's largest urban agriculture movements. Residents, non-profits, and corporations are rehabilitating their city in a sustainable—and often edible—way. Urban farming has become increasingly popular in the last 10 years, allowing Detroiters to grow the city new roots through agriculture. The farms and gardens are being used to help the city not only as a food source but also by connecting community members. Detroit has really become the centre of the urban agriculture movement.

My plan while in the D was to take out some time to connect with some of these groups as it complements my lifestyle and closely relates to my work at Organiclea. Ironically the apartment where I was staying was located on a city garden called "Ohana Gardens", a beautiful space ran by a revolutionary gardening family. Diane and Keith along with their family and local residents were growing a variety of squashes, spinach, salads, potatoes, kale and a selection of medicinal herbs.

The daily view of the vegetable beds, wild flower areas and hoop houses from the apartment were so inspiring. I was told that this was once one of those abandoned derelict spaces which had been left to go wild, and was occupied by drug addicts and prostitutes. The now the fertile land was providing food and work for residents and generating true community spirit in the area. Diane and Keith were not only great hosts but were priceless allies during my time in the D. They were influential players in the urban food growing movement... they helped, fed and housed homeless and socially challenged residents in the community.

They introduced me to some key movers and shakers from the Detroit food growing community.... I visited some great places and met with some remarkable people some of my highlights include visiting; Oakland Community Market Garden (www.northend-cdc.org), Earthworks Urban Farm (www.cskdetroit.org/EWG) and D-Town Farm (detroitblackfoodsecurity.org).

While walking along any Detroit block it wouldn't be hard to get your hands on a chilli dog or some hot honey chicken wings plus some liquor to soak it all up... it was a shame to see that access to fresh healthy food from the few corner stores left were limited if not non-existent... and although the invasion of all the local and express Tesco's and Sainsbury's in London wind me up... regardless of my views you can still go grab a bag of carrots or potatoes. The decline of Detroit has inspired and in some cases forced residents to grow their own food and go back to the root. With limited resources you find local people using ingenious techniques and ways to cultivate the land and grow food organically. While every garden makes an impact in its own way, the subtle yet powerful interconnection between gardeners and community-based organisations engaged in the work of transforming the local food system is what is making a positive change happen in Detroit.

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"One day it would be great to see the young people we work with here, working with some of the young growers from the D on a student exchange programme. Anyone with any ideas or possible support should also get in touch..."

We all know our current food system is broken, as highlighted in this recent report called 'Urgent Recall' by the New Economics Foundation. The world needs a new food economy that reconnects people with food and its real value, strengthens understanding of where it comes from and brings power back to the people who create value within the system - the producers of real food. There's no one single answer to how to fix our food system; in reality there are many answers. If we think of the new food economy as a recipe, there are many ingredients and possible ways of making it. At The Food Assembly one ingredient we are focusing on making come to fruition, is the enabling of direct trade between local producers and their local communities through the combined power of online technology and social networks. Another key ingredient we are keen to bring to life is the importance of collaboration - connecting with and mutually supporting other innovators in the emerging new food economy. So lets take a few minutes

to highlight some of the key innovations happening and connect them together to paint a more cohesive picture of the path to food sovereignty.

Understanding and appreciating the true value of food is one of the key enablers of building a new food economy. As people understand the true environmental, social, societal and health costs associated with cheap food, they realise that buying food isn't just an act of consumption, it's an investment for themselves, their communities and the planet. Changing culture around the value of food involves tackling some pretty meaty (pasture-fed, free range and organic please) challenges; from food poverty to subsidising of the industrial food system.

At the Food Assembly, we're working to address issues associated with misunderstandings of the real cost of food. We're launching a series on our blog about the real cost of food in the new year where we'll look at different foods, the impacts associated with them when they're worryingly cheap, and what we should really expect to pay for them. Through the nature of our model, we also encourage dialogue between producers and customers as they meet weekly at Assemblies. At the the same time, we're also painfully aware that food poverty is a growing issue in this country and are looking for ways to address that by joining up with the living wage campaign.

In an economic system which favours big (unsustainable) producers (from the subsidising of industrial producers to the expense of organic certification), it is important to highlight methods and strategies for supporting agroecological farming. Initiatives such the pasture fed livestock association are championing environmentally friendly ways of rearing quality meat and Farmstart are pioneering new ways of bringing people back to farm the land in a sustainable way. The hot topic of waste within the conventional food system and ways to avoid it is also being tackled from a diversity of angles, from a burgeoning Gleaning Network, to the The Inglorious Fruit and Vegetable campaign and WRAP's Love Food Hate Waste campaign. Organisations which enable direct local trade, through CSA's like Growing Communities and organisations like FoodTrade or The Food Assembly bring power back to agroecological farmers by enabling them to set their own prices, minimum orders and distribution systems. At The Food Assembly, we also see real opportunities in direct trade for educating people about the real value of food, and for nourishing local communities by bringing people together around food - in our case through weekly pop up markets (Assemblies).

Connecting with other campaigns and networks is all part of building a movement that offers a holistic alternative to the current broken economic system. Networks like Food Sovereignty Now! , Open Food Network and the Landworkers Alliance play a key role in building "a movement for a democratic, sustainable and fair food system, and bringing youth and celebration into the mix! Our UK Food Assembly

network is part of a larger international movement of autonomous yet interconnected Assemblies enabling direct trade between local producers and communities. Launched in France in September 2011, the network is growing daily and now connects over 400,000 members (customers) with 4,000 producers in over 700 Assemblies across France, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Italy and now the United Kingdom.

So in a nutshell (a locally sourced cobnut of course): in order to build a future where real farming can really thrive, we need to think outside our (local veg) box, and join up with other actors in the food system and beyond. Let's show solidarity for each other's hard work and together create fertile conditions in which the new food economy can grow.



A Synchrony of Organic Interdependent Livity

I am a mother and, in relative terms, recently sourced from the African continent. As a woman, and an African, I am present, but without voice. Most of the time, unseen and unheard. Yet, my essential being represents that which gives, over eternities, but remains unacknowledged. It is also that for which there is no gratitude shown. Just like the soil we walk upon. Such things have consequences.

The first year of the 'United Nations Decade for People of African Descent' (2015-2024), is also the 'United Nations Year of the Soil' (2015).

I hold this not to be a co-incidence.

These two subjects of United Nations recognition: African people and the soils of Earth, are the twin, invisible presences at the root of much of the world's prosperity.

There is reason for saying this. The labour and sacrifices of Africans have both directly and indirectly enabled, and fuelled, the productivity of industrial growth and the associated western knowledge revolutions.

For the most part, the same can be said of the poorly understood soil. It has been and continues to be exploited, unreasonably to the point of dissolution and in places, complete disappearance. What shall we call this? Pedocide? Lithocide?

Despite this, global politics continues to take both for granted. Each remains understated as an icon of what is good in the world. The People and produce of Africa, and the soils of the world, continue to contribute to global well-being. It ought to be a matter of global shame that these contributions are still insufficiently charted, documented or taught to the masses.

Such poor recording has led to a great deal of misunderstanding amongst the general populace about the critical importance of a vibrant African people or the healthy soil.

In the absence of knowledge, ignorance festers!

Who, then, will see cause to take steps to address their misinformation? Who will seek out appropriate knowledge and action? Are we too embattled by our own blindness to see our way out of the disasters we thereby create? This is a pertinent question if we wish to stem the collapse of global well-being as we currently know it.

I am not being dramatic. The language concerning soil loss as 2015 loomed and began has been dramatic. This piece is too short for me to repeat it here.

If we are restless at the mention of food security and climate change, then we had better be fretful of a scenario of disappearing soils. We might well worry also at the loss of the traditional expertise to manage such fragile landscapes. It is especially so where it can be demonstrated that these tradition soil ‘husbandmen’ have proven resilient under oppressive circumstances.

We may be aware of roving corporate capitalism, looking for ever new opportunities to exploit and ravage land and people. La Via Campesina holds a torch for peasant resistances in ‘Latin’ America, Vandana Shiva lights up radicalism in India; for African people during this decade who will ignite the imagination of the world, one which connects all of the indigenous peoples of the globe? In this respect, African growers must be encouraged to share their ways of stewarding the land and their relationship with the soil lore with each other and with growers everywhere and their insights and experiences given recognition for life-affirming connections to be restored. It is good that African Soil Stories form a foundation for the African Story.

There is ancestral, intuitive knowledge, that the clay of my being, so close in colouring to that of the Earth, is a living, walking, and animated being. It is for only a span of a lifetime separated from the dust of the Earth, to perform a sacred, stewardship role.

I am as the soil on the massive surface of this vast organic, living entity. Like a protective cover for a good 30 per cent of the world’s surface. I am a kin to this medium - which ranges, in depth, from a few crumbs - to a few metres. I represent both the living, pulsating potential as well as the parent body that feeds much of what is yielded by the land. Whist I attended my inner-city, secondary school, we were taught, in science, that soil was one of those things that should be listed under non-living materials.

Soil was to be thought of as dead, inanimate, made from rock, substantially, and so not a thing which breathed, ate, moved or reproduced. How wrong they were!

I felt this in my very bones. From childhood, I had been closely observing my grandmother tend the back-garden soil to produce extraordinary crops with merely the magic of her care. Sweetcorn, squashes and beetroot, carrots, potatoes and calaloo, all emerged from the richly dark, moving substrate; alive with micro-life which seemed to proliferate and creep into areas of garden I thought to be unproductive!

Children, and I was no exception, often use the dark soil of London as a key ingredient of mud ‘pies’. Does it resemble for them the nutritious ‘stew’ that it actually is? I studied the pathways of worms and ants. I loved the squishy and crumbly nature of the London, clayey loams and so I was often to be found digging around the ‘compost tip’ at the top of the garden, marvelling at the transformations taking place there.

Where comfrey grew were buried the foundations of my every present aspiration which were found in the shreds of notebooks and the remains of Sunday dinner preparation and other ‘house wastes’.

It was from this transformed soil that I was almost literally fed until, late in teenager-hood; I left home to more rural parts of the country to learn the cycles of cows and sheep and the tyranny of tractors.

The Shaman, Malidoma Patrice Some speaks of the ritual immersion of the young person in the red soil of his village, as one of the necessary precursors to manhood amongst the Dagara of West Africa. It is where one gains possession of oneself through transformation. Moving from a burial to a resurrection in which one becomes ‘alive’ to one’s own, divine direction.

So my garden gave birth to me, one who was eventually to travel to the welcoming villages of Africa to discover the importance of interdependence. To learn, sometimes the hard way, of the necessary relationships of each living thing upon another, the impossibility of separation and the fundamental wrongness of living in and from a pathology of independence.

Increasingly what I hear coming out the voice of the Earth is a call to listen to the connecting places, that which is less visible, more silent, barely felt, scarcely sensed. We must re-attune our radars for better receptivity, for what is out there and all around us has lessons for us to both acknowledge and celebrate.

Let this year be the year of our truly seeing what is core to all of us: the African within and without and the soil at our feet. Maybe if we listen carefully enough and become immersed, we will hear and experience our own personal calls to action.

Mama D
Community Centred Knowledge





I have been growing my own fruit and vegetables for many years. Some years, like this one, I have had a glut of fruit in my garden and on my allotment. I love experimenting with all the different berries and being inspired by what is in season. A favourite from this season, using the abundance of apples on the tree and some hot chillies growing in my greenhouse, is my Apple and Chilli Jam, which has a delicious spicy kick.

Often jams bought from the supermarket contain artificial flavourings and colourings. Making your own means you know exactly what goes in to the jar, and therefore what you are eating. I make both sweet and savoury preserves from jam, which can be eaten as a snack on toast, a side to go with a main dish or a dollop on yoghurt as a dessert.

Fruit: Soft fruits and berries are delicate fruits, which are best in the summer months or late autumn. Although they have their own distinct colour and flavour, one can mix and match depending on quantities and on what you can get hold of. Orchard fruits such as apples, pears, quince and medlars can be added to each other for delicious combinations but also boiled and strained through cheesecloth to make clear jellies. Stone fruits such as cherries and plums have their own intense sweetness, in contrast to citrus fruit, which I buy from an organic supplier and use the zest for flavour or for pectin.

Equipment tips

Preserving pan: Although a standard non-stick pan does work, I find a specialist pan which is large, heavy and wide to allow rapid evaporation of liquid so that the setting point can be reached quickly makes the process a little easier.

A Funnel: Filling the jars can be the messiest part but I find a wide funnel which sits on the rim of the jar makes transferring the jam to the jars considerably easier, especially if you are making a large quantity.

Sterilising: There are several methods to ensure the jars are sterile. If you have a dishwasher, put the jars in on a rinse cycle on the hottest temperature with no detergents. The key is timing here as you want to ensure the jars are still hot but not wet when filling them with the jam.

Thermometer: There are numerous ways to check the setting point of jam but my magic number is 105 degrees. For nearly all the jam I make I ensure the mixture reaches this temperature so the jam sets to a perfect consistency.

Natural pectin: I rarely use commercial pectin in my jams, relying instead on the natural pectin of the fruit. When using low-pectin fruits and making a larger batch, I suggest adding lemon juice and boiling the mixture with the seeds of lemons which are high in pectin.

Jam-making requires time and persistence. Once you have made your first couple of batches it's easy to get the hang of things and learn from mistakes! My top tip to ensure successful jam making and preserving is to be patient and give yourself enough time, at least two hours.

Poppy Berelowitz

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Community Food Growers Network

We are a network of community gardens around London actively engaged in growing food plants, putting land into community use, and supporting others to grow food in healthy, sustainable ways.

We have 4 seasonal gatherings a year to share news, plans and to organise on relevant issues. Membership is free and you can find more information, news and upcoming events on our website & by contacting.

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