

Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project
Interview with Daniel Denton by Kaia Godsey
Conducted on July 17th, 2023 in Atlanta, GA

[00:00:00] **LuAnna Nesbitt:** The following interview is a part of the Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project. It was conducted in Atlanta, Georgia by interviewer Kaia Godsey on July 7, 2023. The narrator of this oral history is Daniel Denton.

[00:00:12] **Kaia Godsey:** For the purposes of this interview, will you state your name.

[00:00:15] **Daniel Denton:** My name is Daniel Denton.

[00:00:19] **Kaia Godsey:** Thank you. So first, I want to ask about your upbringing. So when you were younger, how was your access to food? How did your family access food?

[00:00:32] **Daniel Denton:** I grew up in Mexico, Tijuana, on the outskirts, back when Tijuana was maybe 100, 000 people. Now it's millions of people. So we lived in the country. Um, my family across a busy road, it was my uncle's farm and he had cattle. They had orchards of pomegranates, uh, quince. Uh, they had a lot of chickens and things. So, um, we would get our, uh, dairy from there. Sometimes our eggs as well, but it was just shopping at the, at the, uh, Mercado Sobre Ruedas, which is like a store on wheels. It's a pop up flea market, or what do you call it?

Uh, and we would go to the Calimax, which is like the superstore. Or it was back then in Mexico. Uh, and we grew a little bit when my, when my father was alive, we had like a little mini plot in the back, uh, beans, chilies, tomatoes, corn, you know, the, the basic staples for a household. Also a lot of herbs, mugworts, rue, rosemary, lavender and things like that. Yeah, that was mostly where we got our food. And then I came to the U. S. when I turned 18 and then kind of didn't do any farming until after I got married.

[00:01:50] **Kaia Godsey:** So when you were growing up, did you help out with the growing?

[00:01:53] **Daniel Denton:** Uh, I was little. Again, my dad passed when I was seven. So yeah, I helped a lot, you know, as a kid, um, probably playing. I remember running and, uh, picking beans and, identifying some bugs and, you know, things like that. Uh, also going down to across the street, getting cheese, fresh cheese, milk, um, eggs, and, uh, a fruit or two when no one was looking. Yeah, we also had, uh, nopales, uh, and those kind of grew naturally, so we didn't have to do much work to grow cacti.

[00:02:29] **Kaia Godsey:** So, you helped with the growing. Did you help with any of the cooking?

[00:02:34] **Daniel Denton:** Um, not until later. Not until after my father passed and then my mom was working. Then, in the house, we had to kind of fend for ourselves. Didn't really cook the

meals my mom would regularly cook, you know, like the beans and the rice and the soups and things like that, but easier, faster stuff, you know, it just takes heat a tortilla up and some of the beans that were left over right and that was it. That was your meal. So not, not, not really no.

[00:03:03] **Kaia Godsey:** So now I'd like you to take me through a fond memory from childhood.

[00:03:10] **Daniel Denton:** Oh, going to the beach, uh, being in, uh, in Tijuana, Rosarito beach was about 20 kilometers away. And there was this beach called, uh, K38, which is kilometer 38, very popular with the surfers and stuff. But we would go there and we would camp out like for the weekends. Uh, my dad used to go into the ocean. In the rocks, there was a lot of mussels growing on the rocks back when, uh, sea life was more plentiful, you know, in the 70s. And, uh, he would fish abalone, mussels, clams, lobster, fish. Uh, and that was like the family would go to the beach and we would just have fun. But that, to me, is, you know, Probably the, the fondest of them.

[00:03:57] **Kaia Godsey:** And would your dad cook what he caught?

[00:03:59] **Daniel Denton:** Uh, absolutely, absolutely. Um, abalone, it, it, it takes a skill to be able to cook it because it's hard. It's like rubber, like a, you know, trying to eat a tire. You want to cook it right, it's, it's, it's, yeah, it takes skill to, to be able to do that. But, uh, we would just take a big pot and put all the seafood in the pot, veggies and that was it. We had fish soup for days. It was just fantastic.

[00:04:26] **Kaia Godsey:** So once you came to the U. S. and then got married, I know you said you took a break from growing. So once you started growing again, did you keep or start again with making any of the foods you grew up eating?

[00:04:43] **Daniel Denton:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Uh, so when, after I got married, we live in Stockton, and the majority of my mom's family, her, mostly her sisters, live in Stockton. We have a huge family. Um, my mom had nine, nine siblings. Almost all of them had children. Uh, we're a family of six. I have cousins that are a family of seven. I have another family that's, uh, six. So, like, we had, like, no lie, about 70 cousins.

So, when, when I lived in Stockton, I got married. We lived across the street from one of my aunties. And we rented her house that was across the street from her house. Like, they owned the house across the street. And behind the backyard, she had her garden because buying her own house, she had a nice little garden with, you know, flowers. And it was just, it's still, still a very magical place to be. But behind the house that we stayed in, uh, there was a pecan tree, there was persimmon trees, there was cactus, and, uh, all kinds of other annuals that they would plant. So I, we didn't feel the need to grow anything cause it was already growing and she would, a lot of the times call us over to go eat at her place.

So again, that, that sense of community and sense of family was still around. Uh, we decided then to move to San Diego where my mom lives and we, we were close to where we grew up in Tijuana. Uh, and when we bought a house in San Diego, we started doing a little bit in the back, uh, just herbs and cilantro and things like that. But, uh, we only stay there for less than a year.

So that was like our first, okay, let's put some stuff in the ground. After San Diego, we moved to Sudan with the intentions of living there for an undetermined time.

We would have done planting over there, which we did by just dispersing some beans where the water would fall, uh, different seeds and they would just grow. But, uh, we came back and we lived in Fremont where we were renting a place. So it's kind of hard to grow stuff for your rent. But in Mexico, it was, it was back to the place where, where I grew up and it had completely changed. The terrain, uh, was all disturbed. Um, the urban sprawl had surpassed it. I think now it's almost like Tijuana and Rosarito are just one big city where they used to be 30 kilometers apart. Now it's like all one, so you can imagine just the number of people there.

We didn't grow stuff in Tijuana. Yeah, so we could plant, but again it was just, it was just, uh, We didn't stay there long enough to develop the land or to do anything with it. We came back to Northern California, we lived in Fremont for a little bit and we grew some wheat, which was new. That's something that I'd never done, but that was fun.

Yeah, we also grew weeds and some other stuff. We tried to do like a tipi out of some kinds of beans. Or, uh, we moved around again and we went to the Middle East. We went to Kuwait and there we had plants and pots, uh, the gardens, just the terrain, the heat, the everything is not really inviting to growth. And then we moved from Kuwait to Qatar and in Qatar, we were able to get like a little bit more piece of dirt. That was where we grew some cucumbers, cucumbers grew really well, and I don't know what else we tried to grow there. But, uh, yeah, Not much, not much grew, well drained soil, but that was it.

We came back and we moved around until we landed in, uh, in a place in near Watsonville, that's in California near Santa Cruz in the Monterey Bay. And there we, we went through the permaculture design course, um, and we got our certificate and we designed our three quarters of an acre place with it. We had, we had cows, we had sheep, we had chickens on the three quarter acre lot, uh, in the country and because it was country, it was kind of like, okay, but still it was kind of like a nuisance to have a mooing cow. Some of the people appreciated it, and I'm sure others not so much, but we had all kinds of trees, planted dozens of trees, annuals, we'd have pretty much everything.

The gophers were a problem, so we had to dig like a trench and we'd put our hardware cloth about three feet down to keep them from getting to our, to our food. But, um, yeah, so, so just growing after we got married, uh, it was, it was just, you know, everywhere we went, we literally put seeds in the ground, uh, thinking for most places that that was going to be our spot, you know, uh.

In Watsonville, that was the second house we bought and we, like I said, we designed the permaculture design certificate on it, so it was a very nice piece of land, piece of property. When we sold it, we were able to buy 10 acres in Oregon and then we designed those 10 acres to do silvopasture and rotational grazing. We also had a cow up there, we had sheep up there, and the same thing, chickens. We added ducks, we added rabbits. We also had bees, um, so livestock guardian dog, and those 10 acres was really a lot of space, but we were trying to do

the best we could with managing the space, like things that were closer to the house were easier to manage.

And we had everything there. We had corn, legumes, squash, cucumbers, all kinds of herbs. And also, two apple trees and a pear tree. And we just planted, kept planting some more fruit trees and stuff like that. So, uh, we still have that piece of land. It's being rented out to a, uh, a family that hopefully is continuing to grow. I mean, that was one of the conditions that we wanted to rent it to somebody who could use it to continue to grow it and we moved here to Atlanta. So we've been here second year, this finished our second year going into our third year now. Um, and the garden is also growing. Quite a bit, uh. We're expanding it.

We tried to get some sheep, we got some sheep, but because we don't have pasture, we had to get rid of them. Just, you know, we tried to do the no till soil, but that didn't work too well, so we had to till. So we're, we're learning and we're, we're, uh, understanding that, uh, you know, like they say in permaculture, it depends, it depends on, you know. where you are, what you're doing, what you're trying to do. So everything is just a learning, growing process.

And we, while we're here, we're trying to get more focused on our ancestral foods and our healing plants that are in our line. Me being from Mexico it's kind of easy. There's a lot of, uh, Mexicans around here, a lot of Latinos. Also, for my wife, who's Jamaican, there's a lot of African Americans here. There's a lot of Caribbean people here. Um, and there's always, like, somebody that has a seed or somebody, you know, we can, we can, be a resource for each other. So that's, that's really helpful.

[00:11:55] **Kaia Godsey:** I know you said that the no tilling wasn't working. So I want to hear more about the different practices that you all have used to acclimate to the land in Georgia.

[00:12:09] **Daniel Denton:** Uh, well, the, the, the climate is, you know, dictates like how much time you can spend in the garden. Sometimes I'm out there and my wife tells me to get in and I'm like, well, I'm fine. I'm drenched in sweat and, you know, at night I'm like, oh, I have a headache. I feel like I'm, you know, it's exhaustion Even though I don't feel like I'm working that hard, the heat does really suck it out of you. So, uh, on a personal level, we got to watch out, even though we want to do more work outside, we still got to respect the fact that, uh, our bodies are rights over us. So, I give him his rights.

The land itself, um, you know, we tried to decolonize and it's hard to decolonize inside of a box that's kind of giving you all the definitions and everything. So understanding that now permaculture has become codified, you know, whereas before it was ancestral indigenous people's ways of life and that's how they lived, right? So now it's been codified and capitalized so people can buy and sell it. Take money off of it. Learning again, that just because it's in a book, doesn't necessarily going to transfer to the knowledge and the practice that's happening on the ground. You might have to just throw that whole thing out because it doesn't apply to where you are. Um, being on occupied land, we need to understand that this, this, this land is not healthy because of the historical past. And it needs to heal, like we need to heal. So

understanding that and trying to support each other, to me a healthy space is going to be bountiful, is going to be productive.

Um, we came in and there was a lot of wisteria, a lot of uh, colonizer plants, right? Getting out the indigenous plants. So that's what we did when we got here and we're still doing it. We're still taking out that wisteria because it's invasive. It's an invasive species and it's going to choke out anything they try to put out there.

So tilling was something again that we tried not to do. Uh, but because again, the compacted soil, uh, this used to be a farm like 70 years ago and there was very little input, besides animal manure, I'm sure, and trash, because we dig and there's like trash in the back, and you can tell that it predates plastic, right, because a lot of it is metal, uh, it's wooden handles, and brick, so you know that it's, old junk. Cleaning it out, you know, restoring it to, to an older time. It's going to take a lot of work and it's probably going to require us to, to do things that are even against what we want to do, right? Like clearing the forest, but the trees, you know, we're going to knock down trees.

These trees were not here, you know, four or 500 years ago. The trees were selected to be put here because they were profitable. So again, going back to that capitalist mentality is like, well, maybe we can do without these trees if it's going to help us grow some other stuff and then bring back some of the, some of the native plants, like the pawpaws or the service berries, or these other plants that, that are originally from here, you know, let's try, let's try to give some space back to them. So those are just some of the things that, um, that we're learning, uh, being here.

It is different, uh, coming from California. California is not as old with the United States as the East coast, it's very recent. You go out to the desert and it's still 500 years ago. It's like nobody gonna be out there trying to do anything like they're doing over here. So there's still some, uh, you know, some ancient spaces that haven't been as impacted as some of the stuff here on the east coast. The east coast has got a long, a longer history. Um, so again, we have to, we have to adjust in what we do so that we can hopefully get some of it back.

[00:16:08] **Kaia Godsey:** Going further down the line about decolonizing the space. Could you tell us what it is you all do with the plants once you harvest?

[00:16:19] **Daniel Denton:** Hmm. Yeah, um, uh, we eat them once we harvest, uh, what we want to eat. Some of the seeds, we let some things self seed so that we don't have to be replanting stuff. If we know that we like it, we're going to eat it. Uh, some of the things that you'll find in our garden are considered weeds by most people because we They are weeds. Mexicans eat weeds, right? We, we do that and it's, there's no, no shame in it. Um, uh, there's a lot of pride in it. So, you know, it's, it's again, in that decolonizing mindset is like, are we only going to go for that beautiful red ripe tomato that has, you know, been in, you know, infused with some pig DNA so that it can stay fresh. Or are we gonna just take what's in the garden? Yeah, a little bug took a bite out of it. Cut that piece off, you know. And give that piece to the chickens and we enjoy the rest.

So, what we do with the seeds, some we save. Like we have some seeds that we had back in Trimdale. That was 10 years ago, 8 years ago, as early as 8 years ago, but as late as 10. Um, so, we save it and we share it, if we can, if people are interested. Uh, we're always looking for seed, seed exchanges, but yeah, for the most part, um, we eat it and we save it. Not the seeds, but the food, a lot of it goes to composting. Or the chickens. The chickens are our compost system.

[00:17:47] **Kaia Godsey:** What are some of your favorite plants in the garden?

[00:17:50] **Daniel Denton:** Ah, favorite plants. Um, I love citrus. I love, absolutely love citrus. So we have, we had five citrus trees. And with a winter blast last winter, uh, they all looked like they were dead. My wife was like, they're all dead. And I'm like, uh, maybe. Um, left them in the ground and sure enough, four of them came back. Uh, one of them was pretending to be dead a little bit longer. So I'm just gonna leave it in the pot on the side. I think I cannot wait it. Maybe. Um, but yeah, and anything that smells citrusy, we have a lemon verbena that's just fantastic. Takes me back all the way to when I was like five and six. The lemongrass, lemon thyme, all that. Anything, anything that has that citrus acidic flavor just is a, is very, yeah, it's very, uh, embedded in my, I think in my DNA. If it wasn't before, it is now. Like that's something that my DNA took on. It's like, yeah.