

Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project
Interview with Amyrose Foll by Chris Keeve
Conducted on July 27th, 2023 in Kents Store

[00:00:00] **LuAnna Nesbitt:** The following interview is a part of the Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project. It was conducted in Kents Store, Virginia by interviewer Chris Keeve on July 27th, 2023. The narrator of this oral history is Amyrose Foll.

[00:00:13] **Chris Keeve:** Thanks again for doing this. Just to start off, I would like to invite you to introduce yourself and maybe talk a little bit about, um, Some of the places you've called home and some aspects of your life that you feel are important to you.

[00:00:28] **Amyrose Foll:** Um, okay. Introducing myself, Nia Amyrose Foll, Noziwi, Reserve du Odanak. I'm Amyrose Foll. My family is from the Odanak Reserve in Quebec. Um, but I am farming in Virginia. I've called a lot of places home. I went to school and graduated from Pennsylvania up on the lake. The army brought me down here to Virginia. And I hate snow. And the weather here is beautiful, and you can grow so much more down here. So I think, in essence, I'm a Southerner at heart. I got here as fast as I could, and I love growing things, so this was the perfect place to call home. There was something about Virginia that I fell in love with when I was stationed down here, and it just always called me back.

And I did move back north, I lived in New York City for a little while. And grew in my teeny tiny little plot there, went back to college in Pennsylvania for a few years and just had to come back to Virginia and I got the bug and now I've been growing for about 20 years, as I can't say that I've been a farmer for 20 years because, you know, you're considered a apprentice or journeyman farmer for like the first decade of your life because farming is so incredibly hard and so incredibly complicated and people don't always realize that.

But now I've been a farmer here for quite a long time. I ended up being the Director of Farmer Training for the Mid Atlantic through Future Harvest. So I trained farmers from Delaware, Maryland, D. C., West Virginia, and Virginia. And now I run a non profit farm called Virginia Free Farm. We give away all of our food, seeds, plants, livestock, and material support to anyone that wants it to grow for self sufficiency and mutual aid, and to other organizations and the food goes out into the community to nourish our community. And really strengthen the fabric of our community by feeding people.

And, uh, I also work for the Urban Agriculture Collective. I'm their program director through Cultivate Charlottesville.

Yeah. Uh, I just can't stop. I've kind of become this, I jokingly say that I'm the seed Gollum. I collect seeds and seeds are my thing. Um, especially native cultivars. My father's family is Abenaki from Maritime Canada in New England. Um, my mother's family is actually from Eastern Europe. And funny enough, I still have some of my grandmother's seeds growing in my garden from year to year.

I just sent some out to family members of mine that didn't know that I had these pepper seeds. Um, so even though my grandmother has been deceased for nearly 20 years, she still feeds my children and she's alive in our garden. I'm going to cry. Sorry. But yeah, um, I guess so. Oh my gosh. I'm sorry. Let me compose myself.

I get like all emotional about food. Uh, you can, you can actually leave that in there if you want. But, um, it's so important to me because. As a tribal member in, uh, from a tribal community that was lucky enough to pretty much stay in situ. For the most part, we did move a little bit, but generally in the same region and not be removed half a country away.

Um, we were able to hold on to a lot of our foodways, whereas others were not able to do that. I mean, think about the Cherokee being moved down to Oklahoma. So I had the good fortune of growing up hunting and fishing and trapping and growing with my mother and my grandmother in the garden.

And food was used as a weapon of war to exterminate my ancestors. But food is also love, and it's how I show that I care about my family. I love cooking for them. I love feeding people, anybody that comes to my house. When I was young, one of my grandmothers, there was just constantly food on the table. She was not very well off, but you couldn't get near that woman's house without being force fed even if you were told you were not hungry. And some of the best childhood memories were in her garden.

Some of my earliest vivid childhood memories, I think I was four or five years old, I had already made the connection from being in the garden with my grandma about what a seed was and what it did and I vividly remember preparing this little patch in my backyard, we didn't have a very big yard, but I had collected up and dried, Violet seeds and strawberries, and I remember my grandmother intervening in me starting to plant it, taking the strawberry seeds that were dried on the, that I had scraped off the outside on this piece of paper towel, and folding it up and putting it in the freezer.

And it's like trying to Mother Goose explaining they have to be stratified. Well, she didn't use that word. I know what it is now, but at the time I didn't know. I was just doing what I was told. Because, you know, little kids. My grandmother was an amazing woman. Um, but she cultivated that in me whether she knew it or not. And I have carried that my entire life.

And then met other amazing seed growers. And traded with native people. And Gullah seed keepers, all over the place, trading seeds. And now it's kind of become a sickness. It's a really great habit to have. It could be worse. I could have a substance abuse problem, but, uh, this is, you know, it fills my freezer full of seeds. It fills other people's freezers full of seeds and fills their gardens and makes me feel really good about it because also food, it can be weaponized. But it can also, like I said, it's also love and food is the great cross cultural unifier when you think about it.

There's that saying all culture comes from agriculture because without agriculture nothing else is possible. Um, no progress or industry or anything else. But on top of that what do you think of

when you think of Italy? Food. Or Thailand? Food. And yeah, I don't know. It's like, I get, I get excited. Like Ethiopian food is one of my favorite things and Thai food is one of my favorite things, but it's funny because their cultures are amazingly vivid and so impressive, but it always comes back to food for me.

And that's just, I don't know. That's my love language, I guess, food and gardening. And I love sharing that with people. And I love sharing seeds with people. It's really important. Um, at least in my mind, some people might argue with me that it's not important, but uh, and that agricultural, um, scientific progress is going to feed the world, but we see that that's not happening.

So nobody's ever going to convince me of that. It's still being weaponized in areas of the world. Look what's happening, been happening for more than four decades in India, look what's happening in Africa. Food is still being weaponized to control people. So I feel like empowering people to grow their own food is, even if I'm just changing one person's life in a very small way, I think it's worthwhile, you know?

[00:07:35] **Chris Keeve:** Yeah, I, I'd love to hear more about how, about how you came to that politic of empowerment through, through seed work and food work.

[00:07:44] **Amyrose Foll:** Oh man, it just kind of happened, but I also see And have experienced myself that, you know, living in America, we have hero worship, the rugged individualist bullshit that we're all acculturated now into.

I mean, I'm in my mid forties. So I grew up with that and, like American ideal of rugged individualist and hero worship. And I noticed, and I've experienced a lot of gatekeeping. Which is ridiculous when you think about it. There's more than enough to go around for all of us. Um, and I don't know. I guess I just kind of decided that I was going to go the other direction.

And, I honestly, one of my favorite things is to connect people with each other, with resources, with knowledge, and watch them kill it for themselves. Like, that is the most satisfying thing to me. They used to call me, jokingly, the spider when I did my Women's Earth Alliance Fellowship. And, because I was always, like, connecting people together. And it was amazing because we can get so many things done together rather than apart.

I used, a couple years ago at the Virginia Alliance for Biological Farming conference, I did one of the keynote speeches, and I used the analogy of trying, when I was trying to encourage the other farmers sitting at the table, many of which were strangers, but we were all in the same industry, right?

I told them, you know, you pull a strand of your hair and it's really easy to break. But when you braid your hair together, it's strong and unbreakable, and we are much more powerful together. And I, uh, challenged everyone that day that by the end of the conference, I want you to look around the tables in the ballroom. I think it was at lunch. Yeah, it was lunch. Big tables, I think there was like 12 or 14 people at each table. And I was like, my challenge for you before you leave this conference is to look around the table and make that stranger a friend. And figure out

how you can do something to help that person because I guarantee you'll get more out of it than they will get from you, but they will be ever, forever grateful for support that you can give them because we need to start looking at each other's as seed growers and farmers as accomplices and co conspirators and a network to support each other and not as competition because we can get so much more done with other people helping.

I mean, I could never do a tenth of what I've wanted to do or have done so far without the support of other farmers in the area. And they give selflessly to our cause to help feed people here and grow out seeds and sort seeds. Heck, some of the girls take the, um, seeds of big bins back to their homes and sit and watch TV and will winnow seeds or shell beans or what have you and then bring them back to me and I'll package it up.

I'm so forever grateful for those people. And the irony of all of that is I never asked any of them to do that. They volunteered to do it because they also believe in that. But it's, it's interesting because of the way that we're raised in our culture of fixating on particular people that are doing things, um, the I, not the we.

We've got like cultural amnesia because all of us, no matter whether our families come from Guatemala or Alaska or Ireland or Saxony or whatever, Thailand, we all grew up in tribal and village and clan communities. And we all took care of each other. Where did that go? It's the saddest thing ever. I feel like I got off on a tangent there.

Sorry. I don't know. That is why I'm doing it though. Um. I don't know. That's like overly simplistic, I feel like, or it's like being looked at through rose colored glasses, but it's worked for me. And if it works for me, I am definitely not the smartest person you're ever gonna meet, or the hardest working, or the most talented.

But if I can do it, anybody can do that. And I just, I want other people to do it, so I want to support people any way I possibly can, to like, whether it's sharing like, this worked really well for me, this was a disaster and made me cry. Don't make my mistakes. You know? And, yeah.

And older farmers, they're the most valuable commodity that you can find because there's the brain, real brain drain and now it's kind of weird because there's a lot of young people moving back into agriculture. Whereas in the last couple generations, it was like fleeing the family farm for tech or some other industry. And a lot of those old farmers, they realize that they don't have a family member that wants to do it. But they are the smartest people y'all ever meet because they've made all the mistakes and they're more than happy to share all of those anecdotal, uh, do this, don't do that, do that, don't do this, look for this, look for that. Those older farmers are so valuable to young people.

I know I'm middle aged, I'm not really young people, but when I was doing farmer training, that was one of the first things I would talk to my students about, was make friends with an old farmer. They are a valuable commodity, and they have limited time, because none of us can live forever, and they'll, they're usually more than happy to share what they know. And they've done all the things, so, especially if they've been at it for decades, they've probably made a lot of their

own mistakes. I know, I've, some of the other farmers in this area have been so incredibly helpful to me, just giving advice, or support, or telling me not to, like, be too discouraged about things.

[00:13:34] **Chris Keeve:** I'm wondering, what stories that elders have given you over the years around here have resonated with you?

[00:13:41] **Amyrose Foll:** Oh man. Odyssey is not really an elder. I think he's maybe a couple of years older than me. But when a few of us got together and dreamed up the MLK Urban Agriculture Center for Richmond, he came to consult a couple times. He didn't have the capacity and time because he's a single father and he, works, I think he's like a bodyguard for state senator or something at the Capitol building. He's like an important dude but he's also a single dad and he has chickens in the city of Virginia and then he runs the RVA gardening club, um, I think it's like the RVA gardening club or something. But he and I were commiserating about problems in the garden and sharing and I laughed so hard because I like to do, corn and squash are my things. I think maybe it's a cultural thing. I feel passionate about that.

But, I was asking him about squash and he was, and he's an amazingly talented gardener. And so is his son, who's very young. We have a son that's the same, er, sons that are the same age. And his nine year old, I think he's nine now, um, is very impressive.

Um, but, I was asking him about squash and he's like, NO! Like, I don't even bother growing squash anymore because of the squash bore bugs. And then I was like, are you burning things? And don't be burning things in the city of Richmond. It like outside of like sanction time because you know, every locality has different times because burning my fields.

Um, and he has chickens too. And then using the birds, I'll like burn the fields to prep them, and it kills a lot of the eggs and larvae. And then the animals will come through and eat a bunch of the other stuff, and then I'll cover profit. And that actually cuts down a lot. I don't have the same squash borer problems, and I'm literally only 35 40 minutes away from him.

And so just sharing stuff like that instead of hoarding knowledge and gatekeeping is, I don't know, I'm sure a lot of farmers have similar stories. I hope they do, because I hope they're sharing things like that. And I know, uh, Odyssey, I mean, he's a farmer in his own right, even though he calls it the gardening club.

Um, but he grows a lot of his own food, and I think that's really admirable. Especially since he works full time and parents by himself. And, uh, I think he does comedy on the side too. He's a very busy person too. He's pretty cool.

But I, I don't know. I've had a lot of people save me from myself with telling me not to waste time doing things. I got rid of my tiller in 2013 and started doing this because I learned from an old farmer to set field fire to the fields. And I know it's traditional growing method from my people, but I didn't learn to do that. I learned a lot about the garden from my relatives before they passed away, but not that.

And, I actually learned about burning the fields from an old white dude that's from rural Virginia. And, it works, and it's around still, because it does work. And, I don't know about any of y'all listening, but I don't like to spend any money that I don't have to, and then that way I don't have to worry about constantly keeping an eye on the garden for pest control.

We've had a lot of problems recently with not having the cold snaps that we do in the wintertime. Some of the bugs are worse. And climate change is real, no matter what any cuckoo on the internet wants to say. I've noticed it in my own just two decades of growing. Um, saltwater incursion, intensified storms, and pests.

Pests are the bane of my existence. But I use nature to work with me instead of trying to wrestle against it, or like struggle against it, really. And that's been really helpful. And I learned that from another farmer. Because I did make a lot of mistakes.

We all make mistakes. Some people don't want to admit it, but shoot. I've failed so many times, and I guess what do they say? The best way to learn is to make a mistake. Oh yeah. I've fallen down in gardening and done a face plant a time or two, and learned from that. And then, I love just like passing those mistakes along to other people so they don't make the same mistakes.

It's very worthwhile. It's really satisfying to see them grow personally and literally.

[00:17:55] **Chris Keeve:** So I'm wondering how that approach to just sharing and also to interconnectedness and like solidarity has manifested in the work that you do now.

[00:18:06] **Amyrose Foll:** Oh, man we have so many spin off farms that have like popped up in the last couple years that I've been able to help from like from the ground up with plants and seeds and chicks and ducks to helping them file their paperwork to get nonprofit status.

I just, I can't not, I don't know. This sounds ridiculous, but, and also making sure that they are not expending resources that they don't have to too. Uh, there are a couple of women, that are right in this region here. Um, and unfortunately they're women of color, and they were going to be, I guess, fallen predation. It was like a lawyer that wanted to file their paperwork and charge them like ten times what they should have been charged to file their paperwork with the State Corporation Commission and the IRS. And it's literally something that you can do in an hour sitting at your laptop. But if you don't know how to navigate the system, it's difficult.

And I had already been through that and I was like, I'll be your registered agent, you know. Um, because they were telling me I honestly, and these are not, these are very well educated, smart women. One's an architectural engineer, and she wanted to start a community food, um, non profit that's pretty much the same as this, but in a county that's about an hour from here that has no grocery stores.

And, she was going to be charged like \$3,500 to file this paperwork, or this paperwork that took us no time to sit down together and do. And even just sharing that knowledge is really worthwhile, and now they're doing the thing and killing it and one of them is that gone from being a BIPOC food like growers Cooperative type thing or community farm to now she's expan

she's done so well, she has expanded into transitional housing for houseless community members.

That's so satisfying because it's not like I could do it by myself or, but being able to just help her with what she needed to get started and then watch her run with it and do so much more than any of us can do alone has been kind of a testament to that whole sharing and caring for each other. In any way that we can. I wish I could do more. There's only so many hours in the day and only one of me, but yeah, that's like super satisfying to be, to see their success.

You know, when we had had our initial conversations about these things and they like knew what they wanted to do, they had a good vision, but didn't know how to put one foot in front of the other to like get down that path where they could run. And you know, what did it cost me an hour of my time? Or at me setting the incubator, or growing some extra plant starts, you know, or making some professional connections, um, so that they could network, grow their networks also. It was like, 15 minutes to send some emails, and I make my kids do the plant starts for them, cause that's what they're, they play too many video games anyway, kids need to be outside.

And, um, yeah, it's no skin off my back, cost me a little bit of time, but it was well, well invested time to, help them along. They did it themselves like they are powerful women in their own rights and built their own success. But I am so grateful that I could have just even lend them a tiny little bit of aid to help them down that path.

So we don't do that enough for each other It makes me sad. Can you imagine how much we could get done as a society if more people had that attitude? There's more than enough connections and capital and Opportunities for all of us if we just share. We have more than enough I mean, look at how much agriculture wastes every year.

Or how many tax dollars are wasted on idiotic programs that public policy makers think sound good or look good on paper, but don't really effectively serve the communities that the policies are intended for because those communities were not consulted first or asked what they want. And then they create these programs that all of our tax dollars pay for that don't really do the job that they're intended to do.

That's another thing. Everything that we do is community directed and driven from surveying and asking. We don't ever do anything with like our food distribution or what have you without community or consulting the communities first so that they have a say in what our volunteers are going to do and what we're doing and what we're growing and where it's going to go and how it's going to get there, because otherwise you're just lording over people and just like, I think you need this. This is what I'm going to do for you. And that's not a good attitude to have at all. And at least in my mind, it's not. Because like the whole empowering people. From other, I don't know how you want to other growers, other nonprofit folks, um, to the communities that I work in, nothing's ever going to be really, truly successful or change anything unless it's both bottom up grassroots up and top down interim support so those people are supported while they're

getting going, because otherwise it's just top down or like it's not really going to empower anybody to do anything or take the control into their own hands, um, if that makes sense.

And if it's just grassroots, sometimes it's slow growing. And that, I have a big mouth, and I'm not afraid to like, yell at city council or, the Board of Supervisors, or what have you, um, because respectability politics never got anywhere, or anybody anywhere, or never made any appreciable change in our country's history. You have to make people uncomfortable, and you have to have co conspirators to make people uncomfortable because they have to see that you are not a lone person screaming from the street corner. And you have to make them uncomfortable because change never happens unless the pain of change is less than the pain of staying the same. So that's been a pretty useful tool too.

And reassuring the co conspirators that I've gathered up in my time doing this. Reassuring them that the worst we can do is try and fail. Because the sun's going to rise tomorrow whether we're ready for it or not. And if we don't try, we're never going to know.

And it's worked pretty well. We've got, uh, public land that we're growing on. We've got private land that we're growing on. We've rounded up other farms to help grow for us to provide food for the community. Local businesses getting involved. It's amazing. It's really amazing.

[00:24:51] **Chris Keeve:** So I'd love to know more about the work of Virginia Free Farm, but first, I'm wondering if you want to talk a little bit about the history of this land that we're on and how you came to it.

[00:25:05] **Amyrose Foll:** So, the original farm that we got started on, it's actually an old, um, sharecropper's farm. The house is kind of modernized. This floor is not really level and nothing in this house is plumbed, square, or straight. Didn't have plumbing until 1963. It was one of the largest, um, black owned farms after emancipation in this area.

And most of the family actually still lives in this little area called Pricetown. It was an older black agricultural community and was a farm up until a few decades ago. Like, I think they did corn and tobacco, dairy. And it was horse powered, like actual horses, not tractor powered, which is pretty impressive.

And, a lot of the family still lives here. I am one of the only people that lives in this neighborhood that's not related to those folks, and they sold it to me really cheap because none of the family was interested in farming, and the man that had inherited this land. He was retired, getting a, he had health problems. He has since passed away from lung cancer, unfortunately. And, um, he sold it to me really cheap because he wanted to see, like, the legacy of his ancestors farming on this land return to farming. And so now we've got pigs and goats and chickens and all sorts of different vegetables and seed crops. Um, meat rabbits, pheasants.

And yeah, I think he just wanted that little piece of, like, farming to persist here. And he liked the fact that we were going to be giving all of the food away. So that was fortuitous for me because I got a really good price on it because nobody wanted it to farm it. They wanted the land, they did not want to farm it.

And I think they probably wanted to knock down the house, but that would be kind of like sinful to knock down the house because I know it's not, it's what, 120 years old? But, um, So it's not that old in the grand scheme of things, but I feel like because a lot of, a lot of the family members still lived here, it needed to stay like that and we needed to honor Temple and Myrtle, the couple that are literally the matriarch and patriarch of all of the people that live in this, on this stretch of land here, honor them. I feel like that's cheesy to say, but.

I mean, heck, uh, unfortunately when we were walking in here you saw the tree mess. Cause we had some storms and destroyed a lot of trees, but there are two hundred year old plum trees that I started doctoring up. They were in bad shape when I moved here.

But they, over the last few years, started putting out a lot of plums, and the great grandson still came here every year to pick plums from his great grandparents trees and make plum, plum wine and pies. And unfortunately, those trees got, uh, Got completely uprooted in the storms, which is kind of great because, uh, Bonnetta had sent, uh, peach trees with you from Ujamaa, so I'm gonna be pulling those root balls out probably this week, and I'll probably replant the peach trees from Ujamaa in that, I know it's not the same, but that was heartbreaking.

He cried when he saw it. He's like 65, 70 years old, crying over his great grandparents trees. Ugh, it's heartbreaking. But a lot of times we don't value those that came before us as much as we probably should, I think. You know, I don't know if that makes sense. I feel kind of cheesy saying all of that, but I don't know, that sort of stuff is really important because if we don't take care of that and remember those people, they're going to be lost forever to history, you know? Makes me sad.

[00:28:53] **Chris Keeve:** Speaking of valuing what came before us, I'd love to hear more about your work with Ancestral Seeds.

[00:28:59] **Amyrose Foll:** So, actually the woman that you're interviewing next, Ira Wallace, is the reason I'm doing, she's literally the reason I continued to do and then expanded on what I was doing as a hobby. And why I'm doing what I'm doing today.

And like, everyone always says that she is the Fairy Godmother of Black Seed Saving in Southeast. She's the most inspiring human being I've ever met in my life. If I had to have a celebrity, it would be Ira. But, and I can't believe she lives literally like 10 minutes away from me. It's amazing. I feel like I don't even deserve to be in this woman's orbit.

But, you know, when I was little, we saved seeds. I was always very interested in the abundance of different form and habit and colors, all the different vegetable seeds. I'm more into vegetables and not really into flowers. And I know some people are super into floriculture. I just. Never really gotten into floriculture so much.

But I started reading about what Ira was doing and like looking her up. And then somehow I ran into her at the farmer's market and I was just. I was absolutely shocked because I didn't even know she lived near me, um, which is my fault because I should have been a better sleuth on the internet. But I started trading with other native seed keepers and I started getting really,

really alarmed that all modern day corn obviously stems from what generations of farming mothers before us, because we were traditionally the women were farmers, what millennia of farming mothers before me curated to microclimates and regions in such a masterful way that things like Pima white corn that's grown on the Gila River Reservation, Tohono O'odham people, That's, it's shockingly well adapted over, I don't even know how many generations. But, um, it's a wonderful 60 day corn that makes really good sized, ears, two or three ears per stalk in 60 days.

And it's very short. It's like two and a half, three feet tall and doesn't need to be irrigated. And then, you know, I was talking about climate change being a pain in the butt for pests and I'm assuming the whole Southeast, but definitely here in Virginia where I'm at, I've experienced it firsthand, hate it.

But who's to say that that high desert adapted corn that doesn't need to be irrigated isn't going to save us from ourselves in the face of climate change. Obviously by someone way smarter than me because I am neither scholar nor scientist. I'm just a humble farmer. But if we save those varieties that aren't widely available, just to have them in safe keeping who's to say that some scientists will take not take the genetics from that and cross it with, you know, whatever sweet corn that we all love to eat at backyard cookouts and like, hang out with our friends and have with hamburgers and sausages and whatever. Who's not to say that those genetics aren't gonna keep corn in our grocery stores in the face of climate change, you know?

And some of the varieties that I grow, there was one that I showed you across the street at the new farm that is just getting going, uh, Quapaw Red. And everything's on Google. Right? When I acquired these seeds from another native seed keeper, I got I think like 100 seeds and I googled and there was like a scholarly article from the University of Kentucky and I knew nothing about it so I was just trying to find information about like what are these cobs supposed to look like so that when I am choosing the what I grow out, that's gonna be my like I grade things in like one twos and threes. What's gonna be the best seed to grow out in subsequent seasons? What is this form supposed to be like? Are they supposed to be rows? Are they gonna be, you know, all over the place? How big are they supposed to be? That sort of thing. I couldn't find anything other than an article from the University of Kentucky from like, I don't know, 2014, 2015 and no Google image results returned.

That's scary to me because everything's on Google. And if I can't even find any sort of references to these corn varieties that I'm growing out, or some of these squash varieties that I'm growing out, that tells me something really important that it's not going to be around. If we don't take, take it upon ourselves as small seed growers to grow it out and then share it with each other. It's going to be lost to future generations.

And we find the same 30 things in grocery stores from Maine to Arizona. No variety. You know, and there's so much more out there. It's delightful, that sounds cheesy, but I find it delightful to like have a rainbow of different colors in my garden and seeing the vast variation, even just beans.

I love beans. I know that's probably the nerdiest thing I've ever said in my life, but like I love corn and beans and squash and that sounds really stereotypical. I do also love peppers, but I just love seeing the vast like depth and breadth of variation that all the farmers in our past have curated for us.

It's a gift, you know, and if we don't keep growing it out, nobody's going to have it in the future. There have been a couple of years where I've been like one of one or two growers growing a particular variety on the entire continent. That's terrifying to me, because what if I fail? I don't know everything. I'm not the most skilled gardener, and I know that. I know my limitations. Which is why I will try to grow stuff out, and if I'm successful, I will get it into the hands of other growers to make sure that it does carry on, and I don't just like save it for myself. Like, oh, I have this thing that's so rare, and commodify it for myself.

Ira gave her some seeds. I have, um, Delta Blue Collards. I got them in an envelope a few years ago and it was like an old yellowed envelope with 12 collared green seeds from the New Orleans area. It was from a family, the Dufranes. They are Huma, French, and African American. And unfortunately Alice has since passed away. The woman that saved these seeds.

And I don't really know a ton about, I don't like growing brassicas. I don't know a ton about collard greens, but I felt like it was really important that I grow them out and try to, at least try to be successful. And God knows how long they sat. They actually all germinated.

I don't know how long they sat. But they had no information. I knew who they came from and it was like the ornate, cursive writing in pencil on the back of this envelope. Like your grandmother would write, that we don't even teach kids in school anymore. And, uh, I couldn't find anything about that on the internet either.

I was probably just their family thing. I'm assuming, because that's how it all, like, a lot of these varieties start anyway. And I felt like this huge weight of responsibility to be successful with it. And I didn't even know that Ira Wallace was doing the Collard Greens project. And I had just, I gave them to her this year because I had been growing them and saving this giant bag of collard green seeds over the last couple years and keeping those plants growing and then I found out she was doing this and I felt like the most responsible thing I can do is not keep this for myself and be selfish, because I'm sure a lot of people do that too, but to make sure last month when she had her evening primrose party, I brought her all of those seeds because they belong in her hands, not in my hands.

Also, because she is so grassroots involved in Black foodways, this is like a living legacy to that family. And Ira is the right person to get those seeds to. And that is you know, other than like commodifying, because we do sell seeds. I always say we don't sell any food, but we do sell seeds on an Etsy store during part of the year.

And I could have just commodified that, but that would have been so immoral. In my mind to do. Getting them into the hands of people that actually passionately care about those things and it'll make them happy. I love making people happy. I don't know, but being able to give that as a gift

to what they're doing with the, I think it's, is it the utopian seed project that's doing the collard green project.

I think that was the most important thing that I could have possibly done with these seeds that somehow found their way into my hands. And, I don't know, I love that, because I am not important in the grand scheme of that seed story. I just happen to be given these seeds, and unfortunately that woman's passed away.

But, I am so incredibly grateful that I was able to be successful with that. And then, you know, I guess push that seed story from that family in Louisiana on to growers in North Carolina and Tennessee and Virginia to do their collard green preservation project. I know I'm like very insignificant in that, like network of people because it was just a few seeds, but if it can help them, that is like the most satisfying thing ever.

And then it goes back to feeding people because I know she does those tasting projects because I've been at some of those conferences and it's amazing because even just in taste, collard greens, if you go to the grocery store, they're like the same everywhere. You know commercially, what are they champion collard greens I think that are in the grocery store or some hybrid that's ubiquitous across the country.

But there is so much more to offer in the way that different collard greens taste, or unfortunately, I found out recently that I am allergic to kale and collard greens, so I can't do that anymore. That was like the saddest thing last week that I found out that I was allergic to all these foods that I love to eat.

But yeah, there's such a depth and breadth of just taste too across varieties. It's fascinating because you think of greens, you think of like, oh, you're just going to saute them or boil them with like some bacon fat or something. Oh my gosh, they're spicy and they're sweet. And then there's kind of bland that can take on the flavor of whatever else you're cooking.

But it's absolutely astonishing of how ingenious human beings are and how they've manipulated our plant relatives to do all of these things. I love it. I absolutely love it. And I didn't even know they had so much variation until Chris and Ira introduced me to that in North Carolina last year.

[00:39:40] **Chris Keeve:** So you mentioned collards, you mentioned corn, but earlier you mentioned Squash is also..

[00:39:46] **Amyrose Foll:** Oh yeah, squash!

Oh my gosh, I love squash! So The Abenaki weren't really like a tribe. We identified ourselves as different villages. So there's like the Mi'kmaq, the um, Penobscot, Maliseet, tons, there's many different. Cossack, Cayuse, Nelhagen, Missisquoi, Sekoke, you know, the Odinak Reserve, the Abenaki up there, uh, Wollonak. We got kinda like moved around, but mostly stayed in our area.

Last year I grew, I don't know, was it two years ago? I need to pull my records. I keep records on everything that I do, too. And I take notes of like, what the growing season was like, how much rain we got, whether we had dry spells. So that I know that when I'm sharing seeds if I'm sending them to somebody I can see what their weather patterns are gonna be like So that I can make sure that they're successful, um, because I'm not gonna send, you know, I am sending seeds to Pine Ridge to chance for the, um, their seed sovereignty and food sovereignty, project going on at Pine Ridge.

And I'm not, they're like, I think zone 4 or 5. I have to look up my records. But I'm not going to send them 120 day corn when I've got 60 day corn that will be much better for them. But squash is really important to me. A couple years ago, I was one of the only few people growing Penobscot pumpkins, which is from my people on my father's side. And they're delicious. I eat pumpkin for breakfast though, which I know is probably kind of strange to some people, but it's really good. You don't just need to make pies with it, or pumpkin bread. You can do all sorts of different things with pumpkin. And, Heck, Thai people are ingenious. They make pumpkin curry. Amazing!

And see, that's another thing, like, food being a cross cultural unifier. Because it's not native to Thailand. But there's lots of great I've seen it on many menus at, uh, at restaurants. Um, and it's delicious. But, um, there's not a lot of people growing that.

And you can't readily find it. If you, even small seed houses online, because you can find anything online. You can find all sorts of weird stuff online. But, um, you can't really readily available, or, Availably find that? Now I'm making up words. Um, uh, what's it called?

But, like things like that are culturally meaningful for me because I feel like by growing them out and then sending half of the seed stocks back to tribal members, that's really important to me to be able, because some, in some cases, it's been lost from those people. And so being able to return things. That's really important. That has not been lost per se, but it is not commonly available.

So being able to send a large quantity of seeds back to tribal members, that's really important to me. Um, to I guess re empower them, empower them to like reconnect in a lot of cases, you know.

One of my buddies that is here in Virginia. He's out at Virginia tech and he is, on his mom's side, Mississippi band of Choctaw and then on his dad's side Black and his dad's got like roots with like VSU and he's really interested in plants. He does the indigenous friendship garden in, uh, Blacksburg there where he's going to school. And he is like a brilliant kid.

But uh, they were looking for sweet potato squash, which is indigenous to that area. And I happen to have it. And I'm always like sending him stuff to grow out. Think that's like culturally significant to him because it's really important to him and it makes him feel a sense of groundedness even though he's like, I think he's like 24, 25.

He's like uncommonly grounded and wise for a young man and it makes me so happy to like to see him smile and like have, like, African American seeds that I've gotten from other seed keepers and traded and have native seeds that I've gotten from other seed keepers and traded and give them to him every time I see him, like I don't know.

So many people don't know where they come from. I meet so many people that don't even know where their family is from in the world before they just became hodgepodge Americans. And like, I don't know whether it's really important in the grand scheme of things, but I feel like it is to me, in a weird way, to know the family history and legacy.

Because I don't know, food, food can become a legacy. The collard greens project I feel like is really important. I have nothing to do with that, other than donating some seeds, but that's like, you're living a legacy and not a life. I mean, you're living a life, but like, your life becomes a legacy when you become a part of that story. That people, generations from now, will be enjoying the work of your hands in the garden, on the earth. That's So amazing to me. I don't know.

I mean, look at corn. By, I think it was like, I could be wrong on the years, either 1524 or 1527, Europeans immediately recognized the importance of corn, and it was already gracing frescoes in Rome. And it's documented. Because we weren't savages wresting life from the ground. We were like master agriculturalists and masters of food storage that literally kept religious refugees from starving to death on the shores of North America. And you see how that worked out for us, but neither here nor there.

Uh, but, it's, I mean, corn fuels the world economy in paint, and plastics, and fuel, and food, and feed. Without, but what do you think of when you think of native food ways? It's nothing or like, well, or like corn, beans and squash, but there's so much more than just corn, beans and squash. 75 percent of the global plate is food that's indigenous to North and South America.

And it's delicious. Unfortunately it's had a lot of negative impacts, too, like the Dutch cocoa trade and what's happening in Africa with deforestation and child labor and, um, those growers that are busting their hump, their hump in Africa to create all the treats we all love to eat and not getting paid well for it. It's abhorrent.

Humans have like this disgusting tendency to exploit other humans and hoard wealth, which is so unnecessary. But that's, you know, from South America and the Caribbean. And it's, it was immediately commodified and shipped around the world. And it's great in so many ways, but it's horrible in so many other ways too.

But that's like a testament to the culinary prowess of the native peoples of North and South America. That our food is everywhere, but it's not visible. Or, like, recognized. I mean, if you Google Native American restaurant, there's like, I don't know, a dozen that come up. And some of them are kind of just, like, cheesy and not really actually authentically Native. There's a lot of them that have popped up recently, which is amazing to see, like, people reclaiming that food

legacy. And making it into a business, which is pretty cool. And having that, like, public facing, like, awareness of what Native food is.

Because, like I don't know. It's, it's so many different things, and it's so vast, and it's so amazing and flavorful, but people don't really think of anything of what our food is. I mean, what would Italian food be without tomatoes? Or like, when you think of Ireland, you think of potatoes, but they're also not indigenous to Europe. They're from the Americas. Uh, or Thai food be without hot peppers. We're everywhere, but we don't get credit for any of it, and it's like the saddest thing for me.

So I guess that's what like, fuels me on wanting to grow and like, share all of that with everybody who will listen to my mouth yapping for an hour like y'all are doing right now.

Um, I find, I sound ridiculous saying y'all, uh, Virginia has infected me with the, uh, with their vernacular. Cause, I don't know, I got chastised by all of my Southern friends for saying pop and like Wastepaper basket, but now I'm learning to assimilate into southern culture. But yeah, I just want to share that with everyone.

I mean when you think about native food actually in this area, plums, I think, were, I'm pretty sure it was plums, were the second most important agricultural crop to the people when European contact was made. But, I mean, obviously beans and squash were ubiquitous and part of that diet as well, but nobody thinks about native plums, and there's so much food, we're surrounded by food that we don't even see as food, a lot of times we see it as weeds.

I'm lucky because I grew up outside, and digging in the dirt with probably much to my mother's chagrin, covered in mud. And foraging, and it's, it's amazing. You just drive down the highway and see so much food that we don't even recognize anymore because it's been forcibly taken, not just from our people, but from everybody, you know?

I mean, there's so much abundance here. It's astounding, food and medicine. But, again, food is used to control people. And if you know that you can get all of these things for free outside in the commons, they can't control you. I guess that's why I, not that I'm like some sort of upstart or revolutionary, but that's another impetus for sharing things with people is like, I want you to take control of even just a teeny tiny little aspect of your life.

Even if you're just growing spinach for a few weeks out of the year. Do it. That's power. Food is power. You know, seeds are power. Controlling your own food source is so important, but we've just been like sleepwalking through this bizarre culture shift for the last few centuries that's kept us all docile.

[00:49:45] **Chris Keeve:** So when you think back to your mother's and your grandmother's garden, and to the work that you do, what are you carrying with you?

[00:49:53] **Amyrose Foll:** Uh, what am I carrying with me? Oh, that's such a nebulous question. I guess this is like, I don't know, it's like some, uh, what do you want to say? Uh, is it a

colloquialism or a cliché saying about like, you only die when the last person that remembers you last speaks your name?

So, recently I was teaching, I did a seed saving class up in Pennsylvania, and I was teaching about maple sugar, maple sugaring, and maple syrup production. And, I ran into a man that knew my uncle and thought he was a crazy man. He is a crazy man. He's a great man, though. From my mom's side of the family, actually, and he didn't know that I had peppers that his mother had been growing in his childhood garden that I had been saving and roses and rhubarb and I actually was able to just, it was really great being able to talk about those things with him because he didn't even know that they were still in existence in our family like bubble because most of our, my family members have passed away, or that anybody cared enough to save them.

And, yeah, my son actually still tends the rhubarb rhizomes that I dug up out of the, like, a day's drive away from here in a totally different state and have carried with me, from garden to garden and shared with other people. And I was able to box them up and send them back to him, but like being with him at dinner. That just, like, kind of, it was weird because we're not planning on that. I didn't even know he was in town and my, my aunt was, like, in New York and drove in to, like, meet us from New York. And, being able to talk about my grandma, she'll never die. Because my kids are now saving seeds, too. I've infected them with the seed saving bug.

And Jonah loves rhubarb, so he's, like, super excited about, like, he likes to eat it, obviously. But inevitably, some of them will go to seed, and then we, they'll make more roots and we'll divide them up. And, um, that's like his jam to do that. So I'm hoping that, like, I'm carrying her, like, her memory. And that talking about her to my kids, sending enough seeds to my uncle to give to my cousins so that they can also grow out, and that Megan can give to her daughter, that it won't, I don't know, that she won't die in that way. If that makes sense.

Just like I don't want that, the woman whose collard green seeds found their way into my hand, I don't want her legacy to die. I don't even know her, but the fact that she cared enough to do those things is really important to me, and being able to get her seeds into other growers that will remember her, like, for time immemorial, because I'm assuming she's the one that came up with the Delta Blues Collard Greens thing and now they will hopefully she'll live on through that.

[00:52:55] **Chris Keeve:** Do you have any lasting thoughts or resonating thoughts that have been bouncing around in your head?

[00:52:59] **Amyrose Foll:** Oh god, you don't even want to know what's going on in my head most of the time. It's a mess in there. I'm just kidding. Um, I don't know. I just, I feel like finding, like, I know I said earlier, find old farmers and learn from them. Find old farmers and ransack their, uh, their seed collections, too. Because, I mean, otherwise they'll sit, and if, like, their families don't want them they might get thrown out, and there might be some gems in there. I don't know, I'm not like trying to encourage anyone to raid other people's seed stashes, but a lot of people will be like, Oh, I've had those forever, they're not gonna germinate. Well they do, a lot of times.

Seeds have an intrinsic fierce energy stored within them. That is amazing. Before we came in here and started talking, we were walking over to this, uh, room. I was talking about the Mr. Stripey Tomatoes. You can find those anywhere. But I had some seeds that were 20 years old, and I grew them out, and they sprouted, and they made tons of tomatoes that we were able to give away to community members that, to make use of in their own kitchens. Which was really great, but, give them a chance.

I mean, what's the, there's a, I have some of them growing out here in the back in isolation. And they're pretty common now, too. I think it's, I can't say it. It's like, Gete-okosomin squash. I don't speak Anishinaabe, so I don't know. But it like means big ol squash, I think, in Nish. And, they were like 800 years, carbon dated to like 800 years old and were able to be sprouted and grown out. That is amazing!

And it's a testament to how much nature wants to live and keep going and make more life, and it's absolutely astounding. But yeah, try it. Try, find old seed keepers, because I was lucky enough that those things came into my hands, and in some cases I was able to wheel and deal with other older seed keepers to get some of these obscure varieties, and share with other people freely.

But if you don't try to do it and don't pick people's brain, don't be afraid. Some of you, you'll end up with someone like me that won't shut up about seeds or plants and can talk ad nauseum for hours on end. Nobody wants to hear my mouth going, I'm sure, for that long. But yeah, just. Keep growing and even if you fail once, oh, I always save some of them because I'm afraid to fail.

Especially when I've got something that's not that common. I'll save some in the freezer for a subsequent season. Do that. Like, create little safeguards and rails on your growing if you're a little bit worried about whether you're going to be successful and you only have a small quantity of something that is culturally meaningful to someone, you know?

I, this is cheesy, but, um, Two Seeds in a Pod, I was worried about some Turkish eggplants seeds that I got from Amet and they were the best eggplants I've ever had in my life. And they produce prolifically here in Virginia. And because one of the communities that I provide food assistance to is the refugee community, it was really important for me to have something that was familiar to the people that I was serving. That they can't readily access in the grocery store.

And so I saved some of the seeds that I got from him in the freezer, and then I grew out a bunch. But they did do really well, thankfully, but I had that little bit of fear of like, what if I fail? You know? Thankfully, he's a amazing seed breeder, and um, I was able to save a ton of seeds from those, and I give them away to everybody.

I had like mason jars full of eggplant seeds, and you know how small eggplant seeds are. That's a lot of seeds! And then I've been able to like give them to those family member or families that I'm providing food assistance to, so they can grow it for themselves, and be empowered for themselves in the meantime while I'm providing like transitional support.

But yeah, definitely save a few just in case. Because you never know what kind of craziness is going to happen. My gardens at this farm looked terrible this year because we had a bizarre hailstorm in early July. And it uprooted trees, it knocked over outbuildings, and it shredded plants in my field. It was the most depressing thing. Because they were big, beautiful plants, and then the next day they just like, they looked like they got mowed over. And it was, oof. Hundreds of plants got destroyed here. That's why the gardens are pretty small on this side of the road right now. Because you never know that was the weird. I've never had anything like that happen here. You never know what's going to happen and that's climate change again, I guess unfortunately.

A lot of times i'll get seeds and if I don't think if I know the origins of where they come from and I don't think that they're going to do well here in the heat and humidity of virginia. I'll find another seed grower. That's like a little bit farther north that might have milder weather or a little bit farther south that has a longer growing season for subtropical varieties that need that extra time and I won't even attempt. Don't hoard things if you live in an impractical place for growing particular things because it's so much more satisfying to grow the right plant, right plant for the right place and be successful than to just fart around and possibly just destroy your seed stock. That would be my piece of advice.