

## Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project

Interview with Alexis Yamashita by Chris Keeve, Justin Zhang, and Nathalie Charles

Conducted on July 27th, 2023 in Mineral, VA

[00:00:00] **Alexis Yamashita:** The following interview is a part of the Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project. It was conducted in Mineral, Virginia by interviewers Chris Keeve, Justin Zhang, and Natalie Charles on July 27th, 2023. The narrator of this oral history is Alexis Yamashita.

[00:00:14] **Chris Keeve:** Thanks so much for doing this. I would love to invite you to introduce yourself and share a little bit about places that you've called home and aspects of your life that you feel are important.

[00:00:26] **Alexis Yamashita:** My name is Alexis Yamashita. For the entirety of my life, I've called the state of Virginia my home and have lived in various parts of Virginia. I was born and raised in Virginia Beach all the way up through high school and ended up leaving Virginia Beach when I went to college in Richmond. Lived in Richmond, uh, cumulatively for 12 and a half years or 12 years and did it in two parts and did a short stint up in Reston, Virginia for about two and a half years.

In 2019, I decided to leave Richmond to move to Louisa, Virginia, to a intentional community called Twin Oaks Community, which is the oldest egalitarian income sharing community in the U. S. I recently left Twin Oaks Community after living there for about four years in December and am now living out in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

So, there are definitely, like, very significant parts to each of the places I've lived, and feeling like they've, you know, really contributed, you know, like everybody, to where I am today. I will kind of back up to Virginia Beach, where I was born and raised.

Uh, my family, my dad's side of the family. He's originally from Hawaii. He's Japanese. So, he was a transplant to the area by way of the Navy. My mom's family is originally from Texas and is of uh, Tohono descent. So, similarly, her father was Navy and transplanted into Virginia Beach. So, I feel like, you know, the causes and circumstances of, like, me coming into this world is very much on the backdrop, like a lot of Virginia Beach folks, you know, by way of the military.

So that, that was also very interesting, too, growing up is feeling very culturally close to my dad's side of the family, which, you know, had, you know, strong ties with family in Hawaii and the West Coast. And, you know, honestly, you know, growing up in a place where there aren't many Japanese and Japanese Americans, and there isn't a large community, so when I think about, like, where I grew up in Virginia Beach, it was, it both feels like home, but, you know, there were also parts of it that felt very lonely, too, and you know, I remember like when I was younger, you know, wondering, you know, had I grown up in Hawaii, if like, you know, I would have like a larger sense of community there.

So, yeah, so Virginia Beach was significant because, you know, I spent the first years of my life, you know, living there until I went to college. And then when I moved to Richmond, I went there for, both music and business school, and that also played, a significant role of, like, living in a city that is, that is quite different, you know, from Virginia Beach.

And then, I think the next place, like, even though I did live in Northern Virginia for like two and a half years, like from Richmond, the other significant place that really feels like home to me in recent years is Twin Oaks community. And during my time living at Twin Oaks community, I was a co manager for Southern Exposure Seed Exchange working in the seed racks part of the business. And that is really when I entered the seed world. It was back in 2019, getting involved with Southern Exposure Seed Exchange. And, even further back, you know, on my dad's side of the family, there's a lot of ties to agriculture, you know, growing in Hawaii.

And, you know, during the duration of my whole childhood, my mom gardened and grew both vegetables and herbs as a way, you know, to provide healthy food to the family. And honestly, like when I was first born, too, it was a way to have that accessible. Because, when I was first born, my dad was a minimum wage worker. There was not a lot of resources as a way, monetary resources around the house. So, definitely, you know, growing, you know, our own food was a way to have, you know, access to healthy food.

[00:04:53] **Chris Keeve:** And when you think about your mother's garden in Virginia Beach, what do you see?

[00:04:56] **Alexis Yamashita:** When I think of my grandmother's, I'm sorry, my mother's garden in Virginia beach, what I see is, what stands out in my memory are the beans and peas that she grew. She every year had some sort of variety of bean like a snow pea or a green bean, on like, trellises that she had built up herself. And, that was one of like my favorite things growing up.

And I remember during the summer times too, like my mother's garden basically became my own snack place, you know, and sometimes, one of my fondest memories as a child is going out there after I'd been playing outside all day. And, you know, just going to the garden and eating things fresh off the vine, especially the peas. And then, uh, sometimes my mother's dismay because she would plan to cook them for dinner, but when she would go out for dinner, like, I would completely pick them, completely, you know, dry. And so, like, uh, she often came to surprises of going, oh, my meal plans changed because now I know why my daughter didn't want lunch because she, you know, ate everything in the garden.

So another thing I think about in my mother's garden is uh, she loved peppers too. So we always had a variety of peppers, like banana peppers, hot peppers. There was also one year where the banana and hot peppers decided to cross. And that was pretty exciting. Get a surprise too when you're expecting a sweet banana pepper, and it turns out to be extremely spicy.

The other things that I remember from my mom's garden is eggplant. A really beautiful rosemary bush that I remember, like, planting, when she planted it when I was young, and just watching it, you know, grow and mature.

The last thing that really kind of comes to my mind is the lavender. So she planted lavender to use in a variety of different ways, mainly topically for skin and to like, you know, have the calming effects, but the lavender bush was planted right outside of my bedroom window. So one of my memories of childhood is in the spring, and you know, summertime, you know, when I would have my window open, sometimes the smell of the lavender would come through my bedroom window.

Yeah, and I think, well, I don't think I know, you know, her love of herbs, too, is what really instilled, like, a passion for herbalism too, and that that has continued, you know, through my life. So when I think about like my ties to, you know, where or where like my interest in growing foods, herbs, looking at medicinal herbs, like it very much comes from my, you know, mother's garden and being, you know, raised always with a garden. And when I was old enough, you know, she got me also involved too with helping with the garden and planting plants. I still remember the first plant I ever planted was a pineapple sage plant. And I was so excited when I picked it up out of the local nursery.

Yeah, so that's some, that's a really special bond, you know, I had with her. And then, as I grew older and learned, you know, more about my family, especially on my dad's side, it further grew my, my love and just connection to foods, growing plants, herbs, and, yeah, and now as I sit today, I really feel like, you know, all the causes and circumstances, even like my past relatives, you know, like, and family ties really contributed to where I am today, you know, and, you know, I know like, um, currently I'm a co director of Ujamaa Cooperative Farming Alliance and talking to Bonnetta, you know, we talk, you know, we acknowledge how much, you know, in our collective is also the presence of our ancestors and I feel like that is like a big part of my connection today is feeling that family tie, not only through my mother, but like broadening out to, to thinking about like my family's history, you know, with agriculture.

[00:09:29] **Justin Zhang:** How did you go about finding and cementing that tie to, I guess, both your mother's side of the family and your father's?

[00:09:36] **Alexis Yamashita:** It's a long journey, and I would say, is very much a journey I'm still on, and I feel like probably a journey, a lifetime journey, not only for myself, but all of us. Definitely coming from a mixed race family where half of my family is Tejano, Hispanic, and the other side is Japanese is, to be honest, there was, there was a lot, I feel like in finding those connection points, you know, and really what I think of the biggest connection point is thinking actually about the ties to food and growing food.

On my mom's side, the Tejano side, my great-grandfather actually was a fisherman. And in, later in his life he owned a and operated a cafe in Corpus Christi, Texas. So one, uh, story that we found out in recent years is we found a clipping, or a print of an old newspaper article back, uh, from somewhere in Texas that was talking about my grandfather's story.

And to give like a little bit of a backstory on that, the reason I'm sitting here today is I'm actually, my grandmother was a part of what is essentially was my great grandfather's second family. So his first family, except one daughter, was completely, was unfortunately killed in the Galveston hurricane.

He himself survived by floating on a door that he was able to grab onto when the floodwaters, swept him out into the water. And in this newspaper article, it talked about like his story of survival in this hurricane, and he kept that door. And actually the cafe he owned and operated for years, the front door of that cafe was that door that he, that saved his life.

And I, you know, we remember hearing stories, too, when my grandmother was a child, her job in kind of the family business was to clean fish, so, uh, so, you know, so that side of the family, I feel like, is a very strong tie to food by way, again, of my great grandfather owning and operating this cafe and working as a fisherman.

And actually, fish is something that does continue to my dad's side, too, with uh, his father, a fisherman, and really well known on Maui as a fisherman, and that's something he passed down to his sons, and, I'm grateful I got the opportunity to fish with my father, as a child.

And so I feel like that food connection's there. On my dad's side of the family, my grandpa Keo grew up in actually like, the family lived in a pineapple laborers, like camp in Hawaii. And that is what my family did was work in the pineapple fields. Beyond that too, they also like did their own growing and this is, you know, and one of the significant connections, I feel, too, is like through my great grandma Juto and my great grandfather Toyozo. So, my great grandmother Juto grew a lot of different things. Some of the things that were staples in her garden were Japanese bitter melon and sweet potatoes, which are really near and dear to me, and she would not only grow to feed her family, she would also grow produce and trade it with the local market in Maui for other foods like meats and things, and, uh, there's also a really, endearing and funny story about sweet potato growing on my dad's side of the family because my great grandmother Juto had just like this amazing gift for growing these big, wonderful, you know, round, bulbous sweet potatoes.

But apparently my great grandfather Toyozo as much as he tried, they always came out as like these long, really awkward slender tubers. And apparently for years, they tried to figure out what was causing it. Just like they could never figure it out. So, um, this is actually the first year, I actually got sweet potato slips this year, and I'm growing the Japanese wet sweet potatoes that my great grandparents grew for the first time. And recently my dad joked is we will find out what, you know, side of the family you take after this year. So I'm excited and I'm hoping that I got some of, uh, my great grandmother's sweet potato magic passed down.

So that's on my the Amashta side of the family, so on my other grandparents on my grandmother's side of the family, the Kondo side, there was also like foods present too, with her father actually was a chef and a pastry chef. So all of these, all of these pieces, you know, emerging since I was a, you know, child.

And really, honestly, when I came, you know, to finding, the seed world and being a part of the seed world has really helped me connect these dots. And for me, like, has really brought me to a place and, you know, like a significant place in a life journey where I've been seeking out, you know, something that feels like it ties both of these very culturally different parts of my family together and I feel like I've finally found it and my hope is for like the rest of this journey in my life of, acknowledging, you know, my family's history and thinking about how this is also shaping who I am today.

I am really, yeah, interested to see how the rest of my journey unfolds. But most certainly, food, the shared, the shared foods, pathways, the growing of foods, even fishing is really, again, something that provided a vital connection that I've been seeking for so many years of my life.

[00:16:06] **Chris Keeve:** Thank you for that. What do you remember them doing with those sweet potatoes and bitter melon?

[00:16:11] **Alexis Yamashita:** So they were my great grandparents and I got to meet my great grandmother, Juto, like once when I was a small child, where I got to see her twice. But unfortunately I didn't really get to know her, uh, very well, because, she ended, she lived to 96 years. But she passed away when I was in, when I was eight years old. So unfortunately, I, um, didn't get to talk to her directly, but hearing from my father, they would just go in various you know, dishes that the family had. Um, and that's something that, like, talking about, like, the specific uses is something that I'm interested to find out more.

And, you know, talking about, like, the things that she grew and my family grew has become more of like, you know, like a point of conversation between my father, but that is kind of, a place that I still have yet to find more information. Another component of it, her son, who's my grandpa, my grandpa Kiyo, he also, grew vegetables, and I know from him, he grew things like eggplants, and I believe he also grew some other root vegetables, too.

I know one of, um, my grandpa Kiyo's favorite dishes to make, and one of the dishes that were well known around the family, and I've wondered, uh, to if this might be a connection from like, you know, food that he ate as a child is a dish called Nishime, which is a dish comprised of different root, Asian root vegetables and also chicken too.

[00:17:51] **Chris Keeve:** You mentioned how as a child you, you would interrupt your mother's meal plans because you love the garden so much. I'm wondering what those meals were that were, that, that, that were planned.

[00:18:04] **Alexis Yamashita:** So they were a wide variety. She would do, uh, salads with, uh, like, uh, her fresh vegetables. I remember, yeah, just like a lot of different, like, I feel like Asian influenced dishes, like, uh, different stir fries with Asian flavors just, like, one pot meals that, you know, encompassed all these different veggies, and things that could easily go over rice because that was, of course, a staple in the household.

So she also did a lot of canning, too. So, we had, uh, things canned as well around the house, yeah. And, really I, she kept a lot of her dishes really light and fresh. Uh, she was also very

adventurous too. And I feel really grateful to have grown up in a household that, you know, like cooked at home, you know, for one, it was a necessity, you know, and two, you know, just looking at like how a lot of our, how like food culture and, preparing food at home is unfortunately I feel like in a lot of ways a lost art.

So I even remember when I was a child too that, you know, to like my friend group sometimes, you know, it felt like an anomaly because we ate most of, you know, our meals at home and cooked at home. One thing I do remember is she would often use the garden vegetables to cook different side dishes that often accompanied fish that my father would catch.

So, he himself too, as I previously mentioned, is a really, masterful fisher, uh, fisherman. So he would often go out, catch fish and what we would have grilled or pan fried fish with fresh vegetables from our garden as a side.

[00:19:57] **Chris Keeve:** And, and when you think back to, to your parents sort of collaborating in the kitchen like that, I'm, I'm wondering like what, what do you see, what do you smell in that space?

[00:20:08] **Alexis Yamashita:** What do I see and what do I smell in that space? I see I smell a lot of different spices, and just like aromas, and I remember growing up in the house, the house that I was, that I grew up in, it was like, a really, I think some people would probably describe it as a smaller, cozy two bedroom house.

So when my mom was cooking in the kitchen, you know, I could always smell the smell of her cooking come into my bedroom. And I remember that always being a very comforting thing around like late afternoon and just starting to smell different spices like sesame oil and curry, you know, scents, you know, coming through my room.

As far as things that I remember, like, seeing in the kitchen is, yeah, the countertop with different vegetables, like tomatoes, the beans, if they were around, of course, and yeah, and just like memories of like my mom sitting there, chopping vegetables and, uh, seeing a variety of different, like, pots and pans on the stove.

Yeah, and, not necessarily something I've seen or smelled, but I just like, even talking about it, like, feel like this, just like this radiating warmth inside of, like, my body, you know? And, yeah, that's something that, you know, I strongly connotate to home, you know, is just, you know, the vibrancy of her kitchen.

I also remember like the amount of spices that she had around at any given time. There was always the spice rack that was the easy accessible one, you know, of like the go to of like the garlic, the onion powder, the dried herbs, but then she had like a whole other like cabinet dedicated to the ones that would not fit on the spice cabinet.

So as I got older too, and started cooking for myself, part of learning navigating the kitchen is to know which spice lived where, because she had so many around her kitchen.

[00:22:15] **Justin Zhang:** I was just wondering whether you've always been a practicing Buddhist and how that influences or doesn't influence your work in seed saving and whether that's like in a spiritual way or connection to the land or what, whatever.

[00:22:29] **Alexis Yamashita:** So to answer the first part of that, have I always been a practicing Buddhist? And the answer is no. So when, I grew up, we did not attend church regularly, so as a back story, my mom grew up in a very Catholic household. My dad actually grew up Seventh day Adventist, so when, uh, they decided to have me, they made the decision that they wanted me to find my own spiritual voice and what spoke to me, so we did not attend church regularly. But you know my dad and my mom, you know, like held to their religious beliefs where Buddhism came in, uh, was when I was in it when I was a teenager and it definitely as I grew older it became more and more in my mind of like really, you know thinking about like what spiritual path if any, you know spoke to me and it was when my, my family from Hawaii came for my high school graduation and I remember my grandmother brought an old family photo that showed her side of the family when she was a young child and I remember still like, you know, the feeling of the elephant in the room when, when we were all standing around looking at this photo, because there was clearly, it was a funerary photo, and there was a Buddhist minister in the photo, but to everything that like, you know, I knew as a child, my dad's family was Seventh day Adventists, so it was like, there's a Buddhist minister in this photo.

And to preface that too, up until that point, or to kind of preface this, my family came to this country before World War II. So there were a lot of, you know, they had experiences during the war, and like a lot of Japanese, American families, those things weren't, it really wasn't talked about. So, recollect it was my mom, I think, finally got the courage to like, ask about the Buddhist minister that was in the photo. And that's when my grandmother, started to tell her, experiences as, a young child of, what happened during the war.

So my grandmother was born and raised, on Honolulu. The day of the Pearl Harbor attacks, my, grandmother was in, at Temple, so they, that side of the family, which is Akando side, was Zen Buddhist.

So they're in their, they were in Temple on Sunday when the Pearl Harbor, when the attacks on Pearl Harbor happened. And within a short amount of time from the attack starting, she told us that, the, there were military that came in, and they took the minister and the nuns away, and they shut down the temple, and they never saw him again.

And she also recollects, too, running home to safety while the bombs were being dropped and, um, Yeah, that was, I remember being, I was 18 at the time, and hearing about this family history, and it just feeling very, it felt earth shattering, and I remember asking, my father, you know, later, if he knew about this, and he said no, I'd never heard her speak about that.

So, that's something that will always stay with me, is knowing that it wasn't until I was 18 years old that my grandmother really started talking about her experiences during the war. So, yeah, and sometime, you know, later, because they were left without a place to worship, also her

Japanese language school was, you know, at the temple, so her Japanese language, learning stopped at that point when she was 11.

They converted to Seventh day Adventism, which really seems like a way to, like, assimilate to like more of an American culture. Also during that time too, all the children had Japanese names. They had their names legally changed to like white American names. So if you look at my grandmother's birth certificate, it doesn't say Sayoko on it. It says Mildred.

Yeah, so learning about that family history when I was 18 kind of interested me more to learn more about Buddhism. And, you know, for the next few years, I, you know, kind of piecemealed things together of like, you know, learning about different, Buddhist traditions. And sometime in my earlier 20s, I read about Shin Buddhism, and, something really spoke to me about Shin Buddhism and, and it's something that, like, kind of, you know, there was a spark there, you know, and after I graduated from grad school and moved up to Northern Virginia, moving to a place I didn't know anybody or anything about, you know, and seeking, you know, something of feeling like community, I, it, ended up finding a shin buddhist temple that was relatively close to me so that is when I first got to go to a buddhist temple and that really solidified my, you know, the fact that I felt like my place in this world as far as like my spiritual beliefs were Shin Buddhism, so I'll tell the last part about this and then come around to like the second part of the question of like does this relate to like my you know, the world that seeds and food play in my life.

So on my grandfather's side, the Amashita side of the family, I learned much later that they were actually Shin Buddhist. And that's something I didn't know as a kid. And, I learned after I started attending service and cultivating Buddhism in my own life.

But one interesting story about that is when I started attending my temple, back in 2011, I quickly befriended, members of the Sangha and one of the Sangha members named Julia that actually was the caretaker of the Japanese garden they had on the grounds.

So they arranged volunteer, you know, days to help maintain the garden. Got to pull lots of crabgrass out of, uh, rock ponds. Yeah, and I made friends with Julia, who was soon to leave the area. So, she asked me if I wanted to take over, you know, caretaking for this garden. And, uh, it was really exciting. Of course I agreed.

So for like the two and a half years I lived in Northern Virginia, I was the caretaker of this beautiful Japanese garden on the grounds of my temple. Fast forward to 2018. I went to go visit family in Hawaii with my father and it was the first time, you know, I had been there in years. And randomly my dad's brother, my uncle, you know, mentioned, because I think I mentioned that he used to, you know, take, help take care of the garden and coordinate volunteers to, you know, help with maintenance and everything. My uncle Fred mentioned, he's like, oh yeah, like your grandfather's brother, your great uncle Hitoshi used to be a groundskeeper at a temple.

I was like, oh, okay. And I tried to ask my uncle at the time, I was like, do you know which temple? He's like, I can't remember off the top of my head. So, one random day we were driving



around Maui and we passed the temple and he's like, that's the temple and I saw the front in the wisteria crest was on the front temple and I realized it was a shin temple.

So without me knowing it, years after I found out my great uncle Hitoshi, in that side of the family, was shin buddhist. And also finding out that, my great uncle was a caretaker of a Japanese garden. So, that's the story of, like, how Buddhism came a part of my life.

And to answer, finally answer the second part of the question, I feel very much that it is present in the work I'm doing now and even in my own growing of, you know, even looking at aspects of the Dharma and recognizing our interdependence, and I feel like that gets to the heart of us being connected, not only as human beings with each other, but to the land and how we're connected to this earth and how we're, like, how there's a relationship with the earth, the land, the food that we grow.

So I very much feel like there is, like, there is very much a Buddhist influence to that, even more so directly you know, having that tie between, helping maintain the garden and the grounds at my Buddhist temple and talking about that family time, learning about like my great uncle Hitoshi years later. Definitely, it, it feels like buddhism is something that very much connects, you know, many things together for me in the way of food and, growing and, existing on this earth.

[00:32:16] **Nathalie Charles:** Seems like you've become a bit of a keeper of your family's stories and I was curious to know whether or not that was, um, intentional on your part or if that was just part of the relationship that you had with your family.

[00:32:29] **Alexis Yamashita:** I definitely think it started, uh, like probably most people when you're young is through the relationship of the family and wanting to know more about your relatives and where you came from. I will say, as I've gotten older, I feel like there has been, it's definitely been become more intentional. For me, you know, being a, uh, mixed race, there was a lot I grappled with as, you know, a child and even as a young adult, even still grappling today of just like who I am, you know, and being a BIPOC person in this country too.

So I feel like where it really started to feel Intentional is like probably sometime during like my mid 20s, you know, and, again, I know I'm not the only one in this, but you know, kind of hitting points in my life of really wanting to like, be able to understand more of who I am. And I feel like that has just grown exponentially too, since I, you know, have found what I'm hoping is my forever home, you know, working, with seeds and farming collectives. It definitely, like, it took on a new aspect when, starting during my time living at Twin Oaks Community and working at Southern Exposure Seed Exchange.

And I remember it was back in 2021, you know, I was over at ACORN, meeting with Ira Wallace on some work stuff.

And, you know, just randomly bringing up in conversation of asking, how many Asian growers that southern exposure works with and getting into and then, you know, talking in conversation about, how we could better support BIPOC farmers and the BIPOC, you know, not only cultivating your like growing relationships with more BIPOC farmers, but also supporting the

BIPOC farmers that Ira, or Southern Exposure, you know, worked with, and I feel like that coming up, what kind of felt like randomly in a conversation really, really field something inside of me.

And I remember, over the next few days, I was looking for Asian seed keepers, and that's where, like, I first found out about Kristen Leach, uh, who is somebody that is, like, I admire so much, and, you know, learning about Kristen Leach's work, too, has been really great. It was tremendously influential and important to me, you know, to know that there are Asian seed growers and seed keepers that are out there, not only cultivating more access to different culturally meaningful varieties, but really coming to this place of like, really approaching their work, you know, through a very specific cultural lens. So I feel like there was something really, you know, and it's always interesting in life how like these casual conversations or these casual interactions or what feels like casual at the time turn into something extremely monumental and significant for your life.

And that was definitely one of them. And then, Yeah, it turned out a few weeks later, uh, that's when Ira mentioned, uh, meeting happening with a lot of different seed company, representatives and this emerging, BIPOC farming collective. And I remember, talking to, uh, asking Ira if it might be possible for me to attend that meeting to listen, and I was and I was really just curious to, you know, hear what was happening in the conversation. And I remember Ira saying write up a short introduction about yourself and explain why you'd like to come to this gathering and, uh, I will send it along to the Ujamaa folks and one of them being Bonnetta Adeeb.

And, I did that and they graciously, you know, uh, told Ira that I could attend the meeting and, uh, yeah, at that meeting, I really fell in love with the project and hearing everything they were trying to do. And, yeah, this was just like in the very early formation of Ujamaa. And then from there, it so happened that a few weeks later, uh, Bonnetta, Nate and Fatimah came out, for a visit at Acorn.

And of course this being during the pandemic, I remember we were all outside, you know, but, um, still like that, the connection, just feeling so significant and that day Bonnetta invited me to come be a part of the project and fast forward to now, here I am. Yeah, and, but to kind of come back to like that question, I feel like, you know, from that point on, there's very been very much an intentional, you know, a part of, wanting to learn more about my family and also connecting, connecting the dots more, of like, my family's connection to food and as I said, agriculture and like how, you know, all of those causes and circumstances really influenced the person I am today.

And I feel like, even my participation in this collective too, like, that is a really important part of not only my work, but all of our work and, you know, knowing that we're coming to the space and talking in very much like, I think a like thread that's followed through our whole collective is, all of us seeking cultural reclamation and, for me, like redefining, you know, my relationship with, maybe not so much redefining, but defining, you know, my relationship to my family and my culture.

So long story short, I feel like it is something that very much started from what felt like, uh, yeah, of just wanting to understand, you know, get to know my family members more and really over the years, and especially when I found myself in the seed world, really became an intentional part. And today it is absolutely, it feels absolutely integral to everything I'm doing in my life.

[00:39:16] **Nathalie Charles:** On that thread of reclamation, are there any heritage foods from either side of your family that you're looking forward to introducing to the Ujamaa community?

[00:39:24] **Alexis Yamashita:** Yeah, so one is, um, and this kind of goes back to the first time I ever met Bonnetta when she came to visit Acorn Community, she asked me what, and she does, uh, a lot of folks, and perhaps she's asked you this too, is what is your family seed story? And when she asked that, I remember it really took some thought, and, you know, sweet potatoes came, uh, first and foremost. So that is something that like, I also feel Bonnetta and I bonded over is a mutual love of sweet potatoes and, that would be one that I'm excited to see, like, you know, the presence and how we can, uh, offer different varieties of sweet potatoes, really grow, uh, within our collective. And I know, I previously mentioned that I was growing sweet potatoes for the first time this year, the Japanese red ones. And got the slips from Ujamaa and, this is one of the first years that we have slips and through a farmer that grows them in Virginia that we actually were connected to by way of Southern Exposure.

So that's really special to me to not only, you know, have, my family's, the variety that was so meaningful to my family, but also feel that connection between Ujamaa and southern exposure through these sweet potatoes.

Um, back in, uh, 2021 or sorry, no 2022 when we had our first seed catalog, uh, one of the varieties is really excited to offer was the Futo Bitter Melon, which was another one that was really important and special to my family, and I still remember like, uh, I was the one that got to put in the bulk order from Kitazawa to get our first bitter melon seeds in our catalog.

So, uh, yeah, that just, that meant so much to me. And, yeah, I'm trying to think. I know there's other varieties that I'm looking forward, and it's interesting. I think the varieties I'm looking forward to, like recently I talked to Bonnetta about perhaps adding some varieties of shiso to the catalog, which I know that may or may not happen and it might be complicated because unfortunately, shiso can be quite invasive.

Yeah, I think to answer the question, I would say yes, there are things that I'm seeking and in in that seeking, I'm also still trying to find out my family history and what exactly I'm seeking. So, I look forward to having more of a clear answer to like what specific varieties that I would be excited. And for now, it means a lot, to know that, there are varieties that we are currently offering and also trying to cultivate through the growers that we're working with that were special to my family.

And yeah, really excited maybe in a year from now being able to have more answers to that.

[00:42:36] **Chris Keeve:** Thinking about your, your current work with, sort of these personal relations with seeds and plants. I'd like to take it back to your mother's garden, because I keep I

keep I keep thinking about the peppers that crossed. I'm wondering if, if you might want to share other stories of experimentation with the seeds and plants in that garden.

[00:42:58] **Alexis Yamashita:** Yeah, I feel like, experimentation, you know, like in my family's garden is, was the leading principle. My mom had, like, some reference books, like, I remember, I think she had the Rodale, like, book of herbs or vegetable growing that's often common on folks shelves, but, uh, she really, like, I think cultivated her garden by seeing what spoke to her and trying, you know, and I even remember, you know, some of my early experiences going out and picking out, uh, starts with her, and just, you know, like, picking up a plant and being like, this looks really interesting.

And as long as it wasn't like a \$200 plant or something like that, my mom, like, okay, let's take it home and see what happens. So, yeah, I think, the experimentation is how we started cultivating anything. And that kind of like, also like, that's how, like I gained my knowledge early on about growing is, through experimenting and, that explains the crossing peppers, you know, of like when we found out those sweet banana peppers were not sweet and mild. And I remember that's like one of my earliest experiences of going, Oh, wow, like things can cross to become something different was because of the, the pepper plants being planted very close and, at the same time and just seeing what happened, you know.

So, and there were like some other, uh, I recollect too, of like, maybe reading some like information on a tag that's like, oh, this needs to be an indirect sun and like, we're just like places where they should grow and we're just planet sometimes wherever we had available space and see how things, you know, reacted too. So, um, as I, as I grew older, I got more interested to like, learn more like actual, like informational based and what felt like a little bit more formal, like knowledge around growing things. But that's something I always want to reserve a space for is the experimenting of it. And seeing what happens because that's one thing I love about nature is, you know, it can have like, you know, nor like so called normal conventions, but you will always have, you know, something that defies all those normal conventions, just like humans.

[00:45:31] **Chris Keeve:** Also in that garden, I'm thinking about the, what you mentioned earlier with the lavender bush as medicine, and I'm wondering, do you have any other stories of, of, of the plants in your mother's garden or of your mother's own practices with, medicinals?

[00:45:48] **Alexis Yamashita:** Yeah. So she was a really big believer in trying to do as much as you can naturally and, yeah, like, living as close to the earth as you possibly can to, so definitely herbs like used for different medicinal purposes were something that were a staple in uh, my younger days.

For example, that lavender bush she would often harvest and use in different ways. One of the ways that I remember, that is a significant childhood memory is like, I, you know, suffered from like different, like, I had a lot of allergies as a kid and suffered from like a lot of different, skin ailments.

Also during, you know, the time as any kid gets, chicken pox, one of her common remedies was to mix, different herbs, including the lavender and the rosemary that came from our garden with some oatmeal and add that to my bath at night. And it being a twofold thing of like helping to soothe, but also like just it being very calming and also to a very young kid, it's pretty thrilling to think about like you're swimming around in a big bowl of like herbal oatmeal. So that was always one of my favorite parts of the day.

Also, like when we had like, uh, when I got sick and had, uh, like respiratory issues, uh, she would make uh, teas from the herbs.

Um, one of my favorite stories of though is, uh, I got really sick one time. I think it might've been with the flu or something. It was running extremely high fever. So she went to her go to like, herbal tea, just to be something to kind of help soothe different symptoms. But this time she put quite a bit of cayenne pepper in that tea and, um, I only took two sips of it before my mouth was completely on fire, but it had its intended purpose and she was able to bring down my fever without having to go to the hospital or the, uh, emergency room.

Of course, to disclaimer, had it not, you know, worked, she would have taken me to the hospital. So just want to say that, but, uh, but it worked and it broke my fever, And it took, I think, about, like, at least six months for me to trust her teas again, though. And, uh, yeah, just, like, every single time she would ask me if I would like a nice cup of herbal tea, I'd just kind of look at her with a skeptical look and say no.

But eventually we, we came back around to, you know, trusting tea in the family. And, uh, really, like, her practices, too, were very, I think, you know, in recent years I did do, uh, some herbalism foundation studies with a local herbalist I knew, when I was living in Richmond that was a part of the Richmond Herbalism Guild.

And I remember my herbalism teacher in the first class said, you know, let's start at the basics of like talking about food as medicine. And when I think about that being like a very, like, primary like component of herbalism. I think back to like my mom's practices, even though it wasn't in, you know, a formal way, she just, you know, read books and picked up things and learned different things on her own.

It was very much looking at that as like food is medicine, you know, too. But those are some of the memories that, you know, stand out. The most is using the herbs for like teas. She would also like, another thing she would do is steams to like, to help like with respiratory issues, skin ailments, uh, and yeah, just, you know, as much as she could do naturally, she tried to do that.

[00:49:35] **Justin Zhang:** What do you think is, I guess your vision for the future, you know, 10, 20, 50 years? What are you looking to build in like your work and pass on?

[00:49:47] **Alexis Yamashita:** Yeah, wow, thinking 10 and 20 years and what I'm hoping to pass on you know, I definitely feel like and my hope is that my forever home is, you know in the seed seed world, and I feel like that, you know, not to go on a huge long tangent, but you know, it's for

many years of, you know, my life I was searching for something that felt like it felt right, you know, to really plant roots and, you know, we'll say my so called professional life.

You know, when I first started going to school, I, well, I started playing violin when I was eight, and for the majority of my life, I aspired to be a professional musician. Ended up going to college and getting my bachelor's degree in music. But during, you know, the time that I was doing my bachelor's degree in music, I started getting interested in business.

Also having that kind of, you know, hard talk with myself about what a life of a musician would look like, you know, post college too, was also honestly contributing factors. So, I ended up going to graduate school and getting an MBA and, you know, I was really interested to apply business in a different way, to like, for the betterment of the world.

And to be honest, at first that was, you know, I was looking towards an art focus, but you know, yeah, in the first 10 years, you know, of me being out of school, I bounced around doing different things, from my first job experience being a project manager with a tech startup. Then I migrated to finance and, yeah, it was really coming, you know, when I moved to Twin Oaks community.

And, uh, when I started getting involved in Southern Exposure and being introduced to the world of not only seeds, but also worker cooperatives, it just, like, really, something spoke to me so loud. And the years since then, you know, it's really solidified that I want to stay in seeds, ag and, um, cultivate that for myself.

And, you know, to tie this into the question about like what I'm hoping, to like, put out there, you know, like 10, 20 years down the line is, you know, recognizing that I am only one human being on this earth as we all are. But I hope through my work with Ujamaa, and I've, one thing I hope is that 10 to 20 years from now, I'm still with Ujamaa and Ujamaa is around.

And yeah, and hoping to be a part of a collective that is not only trying to cultivate a different world in the way of seeds, that we are providing more access to culturally meaningful seeds for BIPOC communities, uh, to have a pathway for that cultural reclamation. Also like being hopefully something, you know, I hope a part of my work, with Ujamaa contributes to cultivating a world where we are looking at bettering the world through bettering communities and also putting culture at the forefront.

Because I know that's something that we talk about a lot in, Ujamaa is, really how much is out there that is really stripped away, you know, of our cultures and I truly believe that needs to be front and center. So in my life, you know, what I can do as, as, as one human on this earth, I hope that I can contribute to that of, prioritizing, you know, cultural influences through my own reclamation and, um, really having that at the focus of my work and yeah, and also in general to, you know, hoping that it can contribute to a world where we see more collectives, more collaboration, and, more, like, projects, endeavors, work, you name it, that really puts serving, uh, serving, uh, communities and our communities at the forefront.

[00:54:17] **Chris Keeve:** Do you have any lasting or resonant thoughts bouncing around in your head from this past hour?

[00:54:24] **Alexis Yamashita:** I think the last thought maybe to tie everything together is really to really, to, uh, cadence this out by saying, I would not be the person I am sitting here today if it weren't for seed work coming into my life. And just looking, you know, at how much seeds have really tied all of the parts of my life together.

And yeah, I hope too, that you know, more people, and kind of quickly going back to the previous question too of something else is really seeing the importance of seeds, but, you know, in that importance, seeing how like really meaningful it can be to all of our lives, not only in the way through growing the food that nourishes us better, but also like, you know, for people to really cultivate a deeper understanding relationship with their own identity.

So, yeah, I feel like, and I know it's something that I said earlier, is that I feel like my work I'm doing today and having such a strong presence of seeds in my life has been, you know, something I have been seeking for so many years of my life and to help answer so many questions and tie so many parts of my own identity together.

I didn't know it was going to be seeds, but, uh, yeah, it definitely is. It's something I have sought for many years and yeah, and I will always have so, so much gratitude for being able to see the whole spectrum of, you know, uh, or like the full breadth of seeds and how they exist, you know when I start when I um came to know and work for a southern exposure seed exchange so, you know how long in this hour that we've spent together is you know really saying, you know me as a human being and being the person that can even articulate family stories and talk about everything I've talked about for this past hour. I really don't feel like it would have been possible had I not, had I not grown, you know, the significant relationships to, to seeds and seed work in my life.