

Delta Rising

A grassroots movement of backyard and church gardening is bringing fresh, healthy food to the people of the Mississippi Delta

The church garden cultivated by members of the St. James Missionary Baptist Church in Indianola provides fresh produce for the congregation and surrounding community. Thirty-six similar church gardens have been started across the state since 2009.

The Mississippi Delta is rich in three things: soil, community, and spirituality. The Mighty Miss has laid down thousands of years of a dark, fecund loam that makes the counties along its banks some of the richest agricultural lands in our country. The rural communities are small, sparse, and closely knit. And churches often serve as the cornerstone for social and spiritual interaction.

Ironically, this fertile farmland has been producing commodity crops—soybeans, rice, corn, and cotton—far more efficiently and abundantly than fresh produce for its residents, who suffer from some of the nation's highest risk factors for diabetes, obesity, and hypertension. Fortunately, the old adage "Necessity is the mother of invention" holds true. A burgeoning network of support organizations like the Delta Fresh Foods Initiative, the Delta Health Alliance, and the Department of Health are bringing together individual growers, grassroots farming groups, educational institutions, and, yes, churches. In many Delta backyards and churchyards, new and renewed farmers are teaching neighbors about the health and economic benefits of growing food for themselves.

Farm-to-plate and organic concepts might be old news across the nation, but in the Delta where there are no Whole Foods (none even in the entire state of Mississippi), an old-fashioned, community-based, grow-it-yourself mentality propels the new food wave. And the deep soils and the deeper sense of church and family are now coming together to bring healthy change, led by individuals and groups who want to revive the self-sufficient agrarian tradition of the region. Here are some of those torchbearers.





The Networker

**DOROTHY GRADY-SCARBROUGH,
SHELBY, MS**

I grew up less than 100 yards from here,” Dorothy says from her modest ranch house’s backyard in Shelby. “We lived on a plantation as sharecroppers. I picked cotton out the front door of my house. The owner gave us a place to live and about a football-size plot where we grew our food.”

Dorothy is now 55 years old. She’s a soft-spoken woman, cool as a cucumber. But despite her quiet demeanor, she represents the power of community and the importance of building a network of shared knowledge among the growers in the Delta. She’s a registered nurse for the Coahoma County Schools, so she understands the community’s health needs. And she farms 6 acres, 1 in her backyard and 5 more in the county, so she knows about cultivating good food.

In 1996, after serving on the board of a short-term Tufts University program aimed at developing food gardens in backyards, churches, and schools, Dorothy decided to expand that project’s scope into a larger vision for the greater community. She called her new project MEGA—Mississippians Engaged in Greener Agriculture.

The organization now encourages and supports small-scale, high-yield growing projects and hosts training sessions in Dorothy’s backyard garden and other county locations. Through partnerships with Alcorn State University and Mississippi State University, among others, the group teaches new farming techniques, such as aquaponics (tilapia tanks where fish waste fertilizes plants growing beneath), vermiculture (high-end organic worm composting), and greenhouse gardening. And MEGA recently purchased 2 acres and seven double-wides in Shelby to serve as community kitchen (including cooking classes, canning sessions, and lessons in produce handling for market sales), a facility for produce storage, and even a small fitness center.

“I see MEGA as a tool to grow farmers,” says Dorothy. “We have to find out where they are and introduce them to some of the new methods for farming. And they need to meet other growers, to have mentors, so we connect them.”

HOW YOU CAN HELP
Send a check made out to MEGA to MEGA, c/o The Bank of Bolivar County, P.O. Box 88, Shelby, MS 38774; 662/398-5161

Dorothy Grady-Scarborough is helping people across Mississippi learn how to grow, cook, can, and sell fresh produce.

The Prodigal Farmer

FRANK WILBOURN, MARKS, MS

In the northern Delta, about two dozen miles east of Clarksdale, Frank Wilbourn spends part of his days below a shade tree beside the Fred’s store parking lot. His red Ford Ranger truck bed overflows with cabbage, string beans, bundles of kale, bags of okra, and baskets of tomatoes and peppers.

Frank grows all of the produce himself on a 5-acre fraction of his 100-acre farm that’s nearby. On his property, two high tunnels (unheated greenhouses) stand in stark contrast to the surrounding straight lines of pines and the row crops of area farms. Frank, in addition to three other Marks County backyard growers, recently installed the greenhouses. They are a new twist in the backyard garden resurgence, offering potential for year-round growing and protection from the harmful pesticides sprayed by crop-duster airplanes onto the large fields of more conventional commodity crops.

HOW YOU CAN HELP
To learn more about the high tunnel greenhouse initiative and other healthy growing projects in the Delta, visit deltafreshfoods.org

Frank, 70, knows the soil. He grew up on this same farm that his father bought on borrowed money in 1939. At age 22, Frank took the road north for the promise of better paying jobs. After a career in the steel mills of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, he returned home in 1989. By then, his mother had sold the family land to make ends meet, but Frank wanted to be right back where he’d come

from—on the farm he worked as a teenager alongside his dad. So, in 2001, he found the new owner and bought back his father’s same 100 acres. He paid off the land in five years. Now Frank grows 95% of what he eats. He does it his way, on his land. He’s driven by an age-old spirituality as much as he is by the knowledge he accumulated as a young man on the farm.

“I prayed and said, ‘God, if you let me make some money and be holy, I’ll come back and get some land.’ I grow this food for the public,” says Frank. “I said, ‘I’ll show you what I’ll do with it. I’m going to till this earth and I’m going to sell some and I’m going to give some.’ And I’ve been doing that ever since.”



Frank Wilbourn came home in 1989, bought back his family farm, built some greenhouses, and now raises food for others.



The congregation of St. James Missionary Baptist Church has been planting together since 2010.

The Church Family

ST. JAMES MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH, INDIANOLA, MS

The St. James Missionary Baptist Church sits humbly in the wide-open landscape of large-scale agriculture fields. The hot Sunday stillness outside the church belies the charismatic song and call to worship that seeps through the brick walls and stained glass windows. Last year, the spiritual energy moved outside the chapel to a tennis-court-size rectangle of plowed earth where cucumbers, string beans, okra, corn, tomatoes, greens, peppers, and peas grow. The healthy living wave has moved from the pulpit to the churchyard and onto the people's plates. It's powered by the notion that healthy food feeds the body just as faith nurtures the soul.

Planted last year, the St. James garden's produce is now shared among parishioners and home-bound community members. "The church is like a family," says Mildred Chance, the garden's chairwoman. "We see each other every week. Whenever something needs to get done, we do it. And we needed to eat and live more healthfully."

HOW YOU CAN HELP
To support the Delta church gardens, donate to WhyHunger (whyhunger.org or 800/548-6479) and specify the Delta Fresh Foods Initiative.

Ryan Betz, a Delta Health Alliance project manager, spearheaded the St. James garden, as well as the Shiloh Seventh Day Adventist Church in Greenwood and 34 others, through the Church Garden Project from 2009 to 2010. "The congregations see the church gardens as a way to add another level of fellowship and shared participation via the development and upkeep of the gardens," Ryan says. "The people are excited to grow the heritage crops they remember from decades ago—butter beans, squash, okra, field peas, greens. And distributing food to townspeople becomes yet another opportunity to knock on doors and spread the message of the church while delivering healthy food."

Although the Church Garden Project has run its course, some 29 of the three dozen gardens Ryan and company helped start are still flourishing. So now the project director and the Delta Fresh Foods Initiative have begun Growing Together, a community-based agriculture program that continues to foster those successful gardens, while encouraging other groups to start their own with monthly site visits, workshops on growing techniques, and leadership training classes for current and future garden organizers. [SL](#)



Doretha Cummings (left) and Estella Farrow in the okra at St. James



Elmus Gray of Shiloh Seventh Day Adventist Church in Greenwood

Start a Church Garden

Congregational gardening can engender fellowship among church members while growing food for the community. And a shared garden plot can provide valuable fresh fruit and vegetables to underserved parishioners, retirement homes, or local food banks. Ryan Betz, of the Church Garden Project (CGP), shares five tips for getting started.

1 Get at least a quarter-acre of open space with full sun. Some churches farm multiple acres at multiple sites. Talk to city officials in the planning or parks and recreation department for details about available lands and permits.

2 Educate the volunteers. Provide gardening books, information from the local Extension service, or expertise from a church or community member. See communitygarden.org for more.

3 Fertilize to build the quality of the soil. Find a local source for natural compost (such as gin trash) and fertilizer (such as horse, chicken, or cow manure). And don't forget the flowers. Not only are they pretty, but they also attract pollinators like bees and butterflies.

4 Plan church functions, such as a dinner cooked with produce from the garden, to keep the garden relevant and demonstrate that the land and the food

it produces have a real-life place in the congregation's shared fellowship.

5 Get the youth involved! Have a parent-child day once a month so kids can work and learn alongside their parents. Connect the dots by harvesting and bringing the food directly to the kitchen for a cooking lesson and tasting session. (At other times encourage adults to accompany children in the garden, lest you like trampled veggies.)

