



THE ALABAMA
SUSTAINABLE
AGRICULTURE
NETWORK

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ASAN UPDATE

Spring 2015

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EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES IN ALABAMA AGRICULTURE: BANANAS

By Michael LaBelle

I just returned from Belize, where I've been helping a banana plantation conduct a large trial in efforts to "go green." My visits way down south have left me absolutely enamored by bananas and all things tropical. I'm encouraged

by recent successful efforts to grow bananas in Alabama. Could this be a new specialty crop for you?

Since this series of articles is concerned with opportunities for Alabama farmers, I will endeavor to convince you that a banana crop might be in your future. If you decide to give it a try, you will not be alone. Edgar Vinson, a doctoral candidate at Auburn, has successfully grown edible specialty bananas as far north as Auburn, so take heart—it really is possible!

Unlike my prior articles in this series, with carefully researched market demand numbers, production outlines and possible profit margins, for this article you

This is Part 3 of a series on niche market opportunities well-suited to Alabama growers. More on the series on page 4.



Auburn Banana Plant Trial, Cacambau variety.
Photo credit: Edgar Vinson

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HUNTSVILLE GARDEN COLLECTIVE COMBATING FOOD INJUSTICE

By Jaleel Nash

Since 2013 a few forward-thinking families in Alabama have started to take their food security into their own hands, or should I say, each other's hands. These families are members of the All African Peoples Development and Empowerment Project (AAPDEP) branch in Huntsville, Alabama, and participate in a community garden collective organized by AAPDEP members. In many African communities in the United States there is great difficulty acquiring fresh produce. This is especially true in urban and semi urban communities, but is frequently true in rural and traditional agricultural communities as well. AAPDEP has recognized these problems and is developing strategies to combat them. The garden collective is one such strategy.

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GETTING "OFF THE GRID" IN BLOUNT COUNTY

By Wade Austin

What makes a farm or homestead sustainable? Well, wholesome food production, great water quality, and financial viability all come to mind. Personally, the aspect I tend to obsess most over is our shelter. All of these aspects (and so many more) factor into sustainability, but I'm going to suggest that the unifying

thread underneath all the complexity is lovability. We must love where we live, what we're doing, and how we're doing it or it will not be sustainable.

In my search for lovable habitations in rural Alabama, I found a "seek no further" sign in the yard of Sara Rose



"The Dragonfly" in full sun, photo courtesy
Wade Austin

and Daryl Bergquist's forest dwelling. Known as "The Dragonfly" amongst the locals, Sara and Daryl's home perches on the Common

Ground Community near Royal, out in Blount County. Sara works

(Continued on page 10)

LETTER FROM THE ASAN BOARD PRESIDENT



I've read several articles lately proving organic food is going mainstream. A more educated public has created an unstoppable momentum so great that America's largest retail food company, Kroger, is not just taking notice,

they're taking action. Kroger's organic brand hit \$1 billion in 2014 and the CEO boasted plans to unseat #1 organic food retailer Whole Foods. Hot on both their heels is a fresh new Midwestern concept grocer with ambitious 2015 expansion plans, Fresh Thyme Farmers Market.

According to www.althealthworks.com: "One of the best...tips for healthy grocery shopping is to avoid the center of the grocery store, instead opting for the peripheral aisles where most of the good stuff hangs out. The [Fresh Thyme] layout has been specifically designed to offer the opposite: a market where nutritious, organic fruits and vegetables serve as the foundation of the store, not the processed foods like in everyday super-

markets."

I was recently smacked with the reality of how desperately we need food education in Alabama. I popped into my local grocer in search of gluten-free crackers. Nothing on the cracker or snack aisles, so I scoured the store and noticed the "nutritional foods" aisle. Aha! I assumed they put all the "healthy" options in their own little area. I walked the aisle in sad disbelief and can only wonder what the store manager's definition of "nutritional" might be. See if you can identify the healthy food options: grits, instant oatmeal, pop tarts, cough drops, medications, corn sweeteners, artificial maple syrup, boxed cereals. Small wonder Alabama leads the nation in adult diabetes. I was so flabbergasted I shot a video: <http://youtu.be/b2ldmdgJzp8>

Alabamians voiced our greatest concerns during the state breakout at SSAWG last month. We worked as a group to identify our top priorities. #1 is consumer education. Healthier food

alternatives in Alabama will increase in response to consumer demand. As demand increases, local farms will expand and new farms will sprout up. This is an exciting time to be involved in the local, healthy food movement!

My trip down the local "nutritional" aisle was a clarion wake up call. Our friends and neighbors desperately need new information about nutrition, and they need to understand that local, sustainable food systems are critical. For Alabama food systems to change in reality, Alabama eaters must first change mentally. ASAN has set this as a top priority for 2015 and beyond. We've made great progress over the past few years and we remain dedicated to changing the definition of "nutritional" in mainstream Alabama.

Sincerely,

Anne LaBelle
ASAN Board President

CONTRIBUTORS: SPRING 2015

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this newsletter, including (but not limited to):

Michael LaBelle co-owns MightyGrow Organics, based in Fruitdale.

Jaleel Nash is the Agriculture Director for the All African Peoples Development and Empowerment Project (AAPDEP). Jaleel has worked in farming and small scale forestry in the rural South and abroad, in The Gambia, where he is also a partner member of a community livestock farm.

Wade Austin hails from the Tennessee River Valley, where he has worked in various aspects of sustainable building, including timber framing. He is poised to relocate from his current home in Decatur to go to work at Camp McDowell's Farm School in Nauvoo this season.

Karen Wynne is the owner of Rosita's Farm in Hartselle and a consultant specializing in planning for small farms, businesses and organizations around the Southeast. She is celebrating the International Year of Soils by eating more dirt.

Natilee McGruder is the Director of the River Region Food Policy Council in Montgomery. She is also part of the Alabama Food Policy Council, and serves on the Junior Board of EAT South.

Anne LaBelle is ASAN's Board President and the co-owner of MightyGrow Organics in Fruitdale, AL.

Alice Evans is the Executive Director of ASAN.

ASAN BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Lucy Buffett, Lulu's (Gulf Shores)

Laurie Gay, End of the Road Farm (Summerdale)

Randall Hastings, Hastings Farm (Bay Minette)

Kirk Iversen (Auburn) — Board Vice President

Anne LaBelle, MightyGrow Organics (Fruitdale)
— Board President

Ayanava Majumdar, ACES (Auburn)

Jessica Norwood, Emerging Changemakers Network (Mobile)

Jodie Powell, Sweet Home Organics (Leroy)

Deborah Thomas, Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative, and the Federation of Child Care Centers of Alabama (Montgomery)

Lindsay Turner, Druid City Garden Project (Tuscaloosa) — Board Secretary

Charles Walters, River Oaks Farm (Millbrook)

Andrew Williams, The United Christian Community Association, and the Deep South Food Alliance (Safford)

Myles Wright (Montgomery) — Board Treasurer

ASAN BOARD TRANSITIONS: INTRODUCTIONS AND FAREWELLS

This winter ASAN welcomed four wonderful new addition to our Board of Directors—here are some brief introductions!



Lindsay Turner is the Executive Director of the Druid City Garden Project in Tuscaloosa. She says that “Now more than ever, with a growing state-wide network of supporters, ASAN’s role as a leader in the local food movement in Alabama is critically important.” As a board member she wants to “grow our network, and to create the foundations of a food system that can better serve

all those in its supply chain.” She hopes ASAN can “grow into an organization that leads food policy, educates both consumers and producers, and provides a network of support across the state.”



Laurie Gay co-owns and operates End of the Road Farm in Summerdale. She first got involved with ASAN about three years ago, and loves how ASAN “introduces farmers to so many new ideas and also how many great people we’ve met.” As a board member she wants to represent her region of the state and “get even more people involved in where their

food is coming from.” She also wants to see ASAN get “even more involved in educating the state about food policy and how to find good food in their area.”



Jessica Norwood is the Executive Director of the Emerging Changemakers Network (ECN), and lives in Mobile. She says, “Very early on I fell in love with ASAN because they have been so willing to help [ECN] understand the needs of the rural food producers and connect us to more people who are thinking about wealth creation from a sustainability stand point.” As a board member, she looks

forward to getting ASAN more involved “in the movement around sustainable businesses, particularly from a policy standpoint,” and to building up ASAN’s local presence.



Charles Walters owns and operates River Oaks Farm in Millbrook. He first got involved in ASAN at the statewide Food & Farm Forum in Orange Beach in 2012. He says, “I love how ASAN brings life to Alabama’s farming and sustainable agricultural movement. It inspires and encourages farmers and consumers alike and gets people

together.” As an ASAN board member, he hopes to bring more farmers/producers to ASAN, and hopes that ASAN can become “the voice, the catalyst and network hub for sustainable agriculture in the state.”

We also bid farewell to four board members whose terms have concluded. BIG thanks to these folks for their leadership!



Sherry Johnson is the owner/operator of SheerLark Farm in Flat Rock. Sherry is leaving the board after many years of service, including serving as Board Vice President from 2007-2013. Of her board tenure Sherry says she is proud of “helping, even in my very small way, to keep the organization viable.” What are her next steps? “Farming... farming... and farming.” She will also continue to

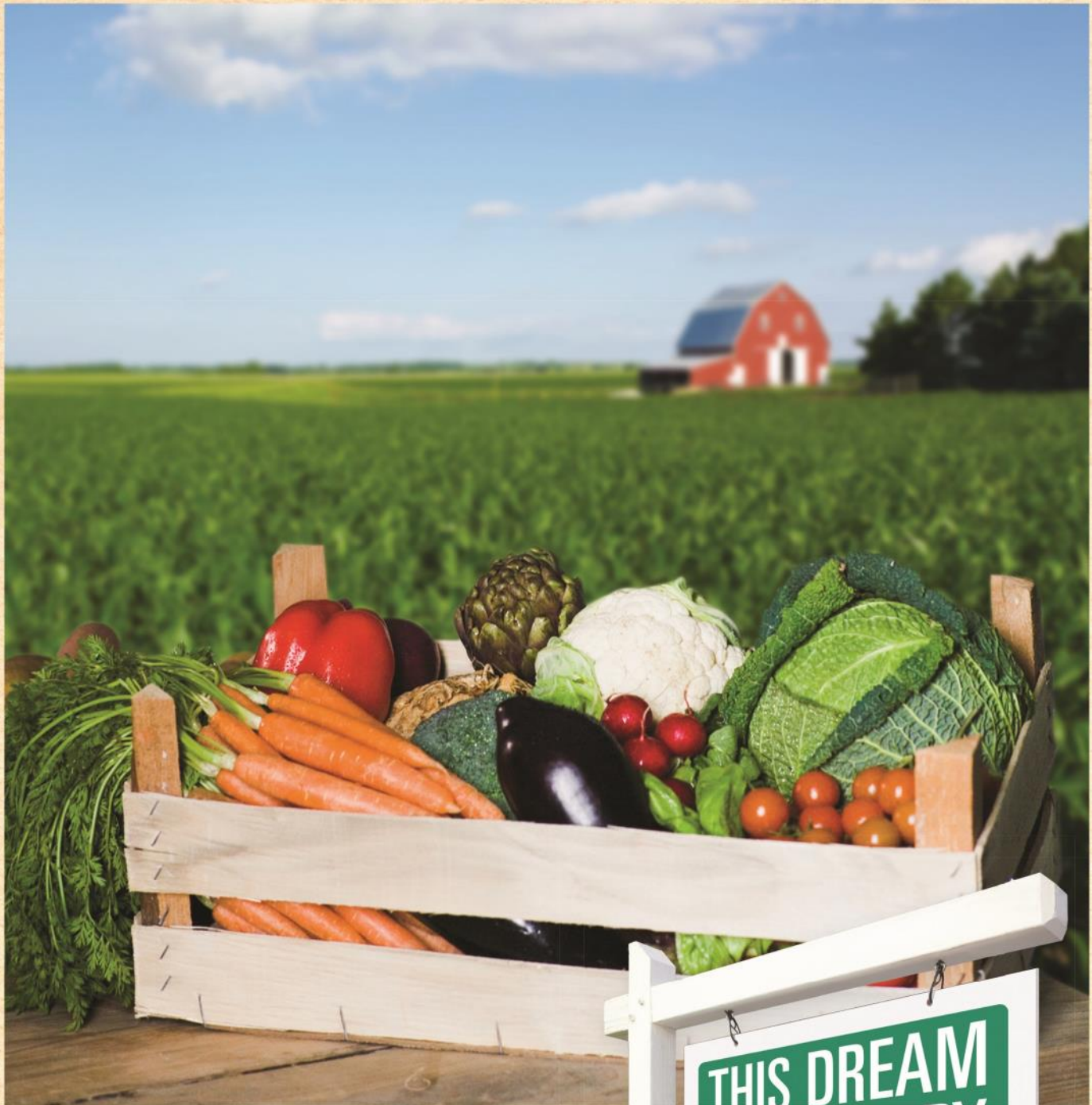
serve as President of the Chattanooga Sustainable Farmers. She says, “My thanks and gratitude go to these, and many more, who came before... Edwin Marty, Gus Heard Hughes, Simon Bevis, and especially to Jim Allen, without whom this organization would have ceased to exist.” To the new board, she advises simply, “Keep the original vision alive.”



Gene Thornton owns Sneaky Crow Farm in Roanoke. Gene joined the board in 2011 and served as Board President in 2014. Of his board tenure Gene says, “I’m most proud of my efforts to re-brand ASAN as an organization with a rough edge, not overly concerned with maintaining the status quo. I tried to make people who were comfortable with the broken food system in

Alabama feel a bit less comfortable.” Looking ahead, Gene plans to spend more time on the farm, and more time with groups “who educate K-12 youth, and by extension, their communities, in all aspects of organic food production, marketing, and healthy eating habits.” He also plans to work with “local and regional economic development initiatives focused on agro-tourism,” like Bon Appetit Appalachia!.

Also leaving the board are **Randal Wilson** of Southern Oak Wines in Anniston, who served on the board in 2013-2014, and **Jen Barnett** of Bottle & Bone in Birmingham, who served from 2013-2014. Thank you to ALL of these fine folks! Serving on the board is a volunteer position and ASAN wouldn’t exist without the passionate service of these and many other individuals.



First South Farm Credit, building the bridge to coordinate retail agriculture and credit opportunity. First South's mission is to provide credit and credit opportunity for young, beginning and small farmers in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. The new generation of retail agriculture is supported by farmers markets, community supported agriculture and other direct to consumer marketing options. First South Farm Credit supports the continued improvement of retail agriculture and non-traditional agriculture through the First South Young, Beginning and Small Farmer Credit Program and the First South marketing plan to identify and coordinate with the new generation of retail farming.

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DON'T MISS THE 1ST ANNUAL TENNESSEE VALLEY FARM TOUR

By Karen Wynne

This April 11 - 12, curious consumers and food lovers will get a chance to load up their cars with family and friends and explore the Tennessee Valley countryside on a self-guided tour. The 2015 Tennessee Valley Farm Tour will highlight small farms from Cullman to the Shoals to Guntersville, plus a few north of the border.

Participating farms will host visitors from 2-6 pm on Saturday and Sunday. The tour allows consumers to meet their favorite local farmers, see how they are getting ready for a busy growing season, and do a little shopping. We hope the tour will get visitors ready for a great year of eating fresh local foods.

For \$25, each carload receives a map of the farms with directions, a copy of ASAN's local food guide, and a 2015 Farm Tour magnet for their car. Any proceeds will be granted to local farmers.

If you're a farmer who would like to host visitors, or would like to volunteer at area farms during the tour, contact 256-520-2400 or rositasfarm@gmail.com for more information.

The tour is brought to you by Rosita's Farm; the Alabama Cooperative Extension System; the Alabama Mountains, Rivers, and Valleys RC&D Council; the Northwest Alabama RC&D Council; the Small Farms Research Center (AAMU); the Greene Street Market at Nativity; the USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program; and the Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network. More information at www.rositasfarm.com/farmtour.



CHANGES, TRANSITIONS, AND IMPROVEMENTS AT ASAN!

Announcements from the ASAN "world headquarters"...

Farm-to-School State Lead Change

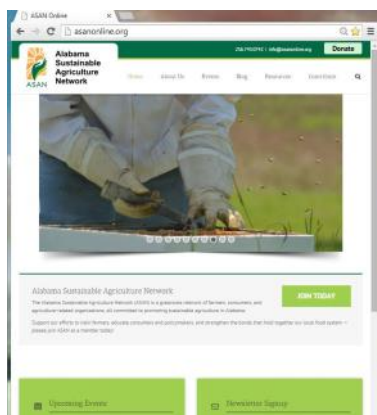
As of February, ASAN is no longer serving as the National Farm to School Network's (NFSN) State Lead Agency for Alabama. We have served in that role since mid-2013, promoting farm-to-school in Alabama by lifting up success stories, networking those involved so as to share experiences and learn from one another, and providing a clearinghouse for those interested in finding out more and getting more involved. There has been and continues to be huge growth in farm-to-school efforts around the state and around the country, and we're proud to have been a small part of that growth.

However, with a single staff person, the board and the Executive Director felt that we were not able to devote the attention and energy that we wanted to, to the job. ASAN will still

continue to support farm-to-school in Alabama in whatever ways we can, of course! We will do so in a supporting role to the new State Co-Leads, Don Wambles of the Farmers Market Authority and Meghan Tanner of the Bay Area Food Bank. We are excited to work with these two farm-to-school leaders and their respective organizations to continue to grow farm-to-school in Alabama!

New Website

If you've stopped by to see us at www.asanonline.org anytime in the past month or so, you've noticed that we have a brand new website! The new site



Homepage of newly redesigned ASAN website

is simple, stream-lined, functional, and in our opinions, quite good-looking! Check it out! While you're there, browse the events page (which is already fully stocked), or join/renew your ASAN membership! We're still in the process of populating the resources and blog pages with informational goodies, news, and all you

have come to expect from ASAN. If you have suggestions of web tools, videos, articles, or other resources that have been valuable to you (as a farmer or consumer or activist!), we whole-heartedly welcome recommendations! We want our members and other supporters to help us make the page something that will be useful, familiar, navigable, and worth turning to and returning to!

River Region Food Policy Council Partnership

ASAN will now serve as the fiscal agent for the River Region Food Policy Council (RRFPC), which engages the citizens of a handful of counties in the Montgomery area, in grassroots food policy education and advocacy. The RRFPC is a central player in the Alabama Food Policy Council, a loose coalition for which ASAN serves as the administrative lead, and many of those in the RRFPC are ASAN members and supporters. We are excited to grow our partnership with the RRFPC, and to help support the great community-based work they're leading in Montgomery, Macon, Lowndes, and (soon) Elmore and Autauga counties! If you're in the area and want to get involved, check out www.riverregionfood.org!

BANANAS (CONTINUED)

(Continued from page 1)

will need to use your imagination. We're talking about a very novel crop, so there aren't a lot of numbers out there.

Imagine the scenario: You arrive at the farmers' market early on a Saturday and begin unpacking your late season produce. In some cases, the pick-in's are slim—it's a little early for late-season tomatoes and not quite late enough for cooler season produce. But you, the ever questing Alabama farmer, have a surprise for the market. You have the only local source of Alabama grown bananas! Do you think the sight of 4 inch golden bananas will get the attention of shoppers (and their children) looking for the something different and delicious?

Banana Basics

At any given time, a banana plant will have three successive generations in the works – like built-in succession planting! The "mother" is the fruiting plant, which puts on a "follower." Once the follower is about half grown, the "jack" appears at the base. This pattern causes the plants to "walk" across the field since all new growth occurs on one side of the plant. Be-

cause of this, growers fertilize in the direction the plant is growing. In Belize, growers replant about every ten years, and a grower expects a harvest every 15-20 weeks. Here in Alabama, we can expect one crop per year.

Banana plants are relatively easy to grow. They like ample water, but do not tolerate "wet feet," so plant them in well drained, compost rich soil. They grow best in full or partial sun and will benefit from protections against violent wind. In Alabama, it will take at least a full season to establish the mother plant's root system, so ideally you would order and install your banana plants after all danger of frost has passed. They should be planted on a raised row or bed at least 10 feet apart. If planting only one row, you will get the best growth if the row runs east/west rather than north/south. This gives all the plants equal access to sunlight. During the establishment phase while the bananas are settling in, a mulch of straw will help

About This Series

For Alabama farmers to prosper into the future, we need to look outside of the traditional crops that have been grown and sold in Alabama for generations. This series aims to highlight new opportunities that Alabama farmers can pursue with a minimum of investment in land, equipment and capital.

Each article will consist of: an introduction to the opportunity; why it appears to have a bright future; potential pitfalls to watch out for; and the market outlook moving forward.

Recap of the series so far: part 1 (Fall 2014) focused on elderberries, and part 2 (Winter 2014-15) focused on shiitake mushrooms.

lay them on the ground to serve as mulch. Construct a wire cage from concrete reinforcement wire. For most of the plants you will need about 10' of wire shaped into a round column. Wrap the column in stretch plastic, if available, and slide over the trunk of the plant. Secure the wire to the ground with stakes and string. The plastic will protect the trunk from wind-driven cold and will provide a frame in case you need to cover the plants in extreme cold.

The frames can stay in place until spring.

Choosing Varieties

Which varieties can you grow in Alabama? That depends on whether or not you want to baby these sweet little guys. Growing in a high tunnel will certainly allow you to grow bananas in the lower half of the state and a bit farther north.

Musa 'Ice Crème' - This cultivar is reportedly the best tasting banana available to temperate zone gardeners. The leaves are silver-green in color, as is the fruit. The bananas taste like vanilla custard or ice cream. They grow in zones 8-10, in sun to partial sun and grow to a height of 180".

Musa 'Namwah Dwarf' (Namwah Banana) - This edible variety from Thailand has proven to be amazingly winter hardy, sailing through 8 degrees F without the benefit of mulch. My two-year-old plants top out at 8' tall in my high tunnel near Mobile, AL, zone 7. To get fruit, Musa 'Namwah' will need to be caged during the winter months. Hardiness Zones 7b-10.

Musa 'Orinoco' (Orinoco Banana Tree) - This amazing banana is one of the most cold-hardy of the edible fruiting banana trees, commonly grown for fruit in the US Gulf Coast region. Musa 'Orinoco' amazes visitors with its nice fruit clusters in our Zone 7 high tunnel.

(Continued on page 7)



Clockwise from top left: Commercial banana harvest in Belize; photo credit Michael LaBelle. From left to right, the mother stem, the follower, and the jack; photo credit Michael LaBelle. Auburn Banana Plant Trial, Cacambau variety; photo credit Edgar Vinson.

maintain proper moisture and weed suppression.

Depending on the variety and how far north you are, you may need to provide a cage to protect the stump of the mother plant during the winter. Mild frost is to be expected and will not harm the plant. What I recommend is to let the first frost kill the foliage. Cut the leaves loose from the plant and

BANANAS (CONTINUED)

(Continued from page 6)

For us, a height of 10' is common, although Musa 'Orinoco' can reach 21' in more hospitable climates! Musa 'Orinoco' requires the pseudo stem to remain growing for at least 9 months to produce fruit, so we recommend caging the plants in winter to preserve next year's fruiting stalks. Hardiness Zone 8-10, and colder with protection.



Fairhope banana plants, Cavendish variety; photo credit Edgar Vinson.

Other Benefits

In the debate about reducing the carbon footprint of our food, tropical fruits are high profile items. Since many tropical fruits travel at least 1,500 miles from Central America to our tables, Alabama farmers are encouraged to search out acceptable varieties that will grow locally. Bananas are one of the most consumed fruits in the United States, and

growing them as part of our fall fruit crops will reduce our dependence on foreign-grown produce.

We can also contribute to diversity. Most people do not realize that the vast majority of the bananas consumed in the world come from one variety, the Cavendish. Developed over 50 years ago to resist the disease known as "Panama Disease," a form of fusarium wilt, the Cav-

endish cultivar saved banana growers. Now, this variety is under assault by yet another fungal attacker, Black Sigatoka. Tropical growers spray fungicide weekly to combat the necrotic effects of this airborne fungal disease. Causing leaf damage, the sigatoka fungus reduces the plant's ability to convert soil nutrients into plant energy, reducing production. The cost associated with weekly aerial spraying, combined with reduced production can have growers struggling to remain profitable.

Since bananas are not common in Alabama, your crops should be free from the diseases common to tropical fruit production. I'd like to encourage you to explore non-traditional crops not normally associated with Alabama. If bananas strike your fancy, there is a wealth of information on the internet. Remember, just because a plant is not native to Alabama does not mean it can't be grown here with a little knowledge and TLC!

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Increasing access to healthy food can also create more retail opportunities for locally-grown produce and provide opportunities for farmers markets and produce stands to be part of Alabama's solution to ensuring every child and family has access to healthy foods.



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ROOTED IN THE LAND: WISDOM FROM BLACK WOMEN FARMERS IN ALABAMA

By Natilee McGruder

As an Alabama woman who is a descendant of agriculture savvy slaves, determined sharecroppers, and avid gardeners I feel that cultivating and respecting the land is my ancestral birthright. While I hear “the call” of the land, I need experience and guidance to be successful in working it. For this installment of “Rooted in the Land,” I asked my elders, Yawah and Flora, to share some of their history and wisdom with aspiring black farmers like myself.

Yawah Aniger was born into a farming family in the town of Cuba, in Sumter County, Alabama, and was shaped and molded by her great aunt Mahalah Johnson Waters who taught her the basics of farming. “Ma Dear,” as they called Mahalah, grew cotton and corn to make money while selling eggs and butter on the side. From her, Yawah learned that farming meant being equally frugal and generous — it’s not about the money, but the community.

Mahalah did most of the land clearing, planting, harvesting and selling on their land, all while teaching Yawah about the importance of the moon. New, full, waxing, waning, blue and harvest, the phases told her when to plant, harvest, pull teeth, heal a cut and anything else that needed doing on the farm.

Yawah sees the legacy of black farming escalating in a natural way “for those of us who answer the call”, following our

intuition, listening to the earth and being humble. Besides intuition she says to educate yourself and join local groups like ASAN to learn from others, take part in a community and utilize the latest technology, grant and loan

programs. Things are changing — in the 1980s Yawah was told that there were no programs for her by NRCS, but now she says there are opportunities for limited-resource, socially disadvantaged, beginning and female farmers.

Her vision is for Mahalah’s Farm to be a teaching farm, which busloads of children can visit and see how the food they eat is grown. The farm would be a teaching facility partnered with schools — the best solution to the problem of bridging the gap between urban children and country life. Yawah calls for all people to be good stewards of the land, to KEEP their land, to grow where they are, and to let food be our medicine and medicine be our food.

My next lessons came from Flora Brown, manager of the Fairview Farmers Market in Montgomery. She was raised in a family of farmers in the Kingston Community of Autauga County. Farming is in her blood because she grew up farming and eating from the farm, plus everyone around her in Autauga and Lowndes

County farmed. She remembers that men and boys did most of the plowing and planting while the women helped with the picking and preserving of produce.

As far as the future of young black farmers, Flora says, “we owe them the opportunity to work with them and show them how to be successful before they get discouraged and walk away.” She says it was a lost generation that left the farm and now that they are starting to come back they don’t have property because it has all been sold. “You look around and see



Flora Brown at the Fairview Farmers Market (Montgomery), photo credit Kisha Nicolas.

these high-rises and nice houses and you look at whose land this was — it was black people’s land. Pike Road was plenty of black folks—but it’s all gone now.”

Her advice to support young black farmers is to get them educated: on high tunnel, irrigation

and intensive practices, and anything that can make it easier to farm. Young farmers may not have access to a lot of land so they need to learn how to grow to their full capacity on the properties they do have. They must research the market and learn from the “farm to table” movement. See who you’re marketing to and plant what your market will pay for, Flora advises.

She also says “you must have a marketing plan when you go into farming. You must be able not only to grow, but also to sell. That’s education—put in the ground, take from the ground and put it on someone else’s table.” It is not easy but she notes that “we all got to eat” and if we have a dying breed of farmers and nobody wants to farm we are going to be in trouble.

Flora also points out that to farm you need finances—for fertilizer, the land, basic equipment, an irrigation system and more—but she feels that younger black people don’t farm because they don’t have (or don’t know about) those resources readily available to them.

Overall what I learned from Yawah and Flora was to heed the calling that is pushing me towards my land in Midland City. I believe in the words of another great black woman, Mary MacLoud Bethune who said, “For I am my mother’s daughter, and the drums of Africa still beat in my heart. They will not let me rest while there is a single Negro boy or girl without a chance to prove his worth.” For me, this means to enter cautiously into the process of returning to the land — with the proper finances, skills, education, mentorship and community to survive and thrive — and to bring some folks along with me.



Top: Yawah (3rd from left) and volunteers at a 2013 ASAN crop mob workday at Mahalah Farm, photo credit: Alice Evans. Right: Yawah lays irrigation line, photo courtesy Yawah Awolowo.





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OFF THE GRID (CONT'D)

(Continued from page 1)

as a wellness nurse, as well as gardening, practicing herbalism, and duck keeping; and Daryl works on solar technologies and energy efficiency through his business, Earth Steward Consulting. Their commitment to stewardship and sustainability is reflected in the home they've crafted as well as the ways they choose to live. The Dragonfly demonstrates that a solar-powered, modern home can be built on a reasonably modest budget, utilizing active systems and passive design features to create a lovable living space that just keeps getting better.

Sara and Daryl received plenty of inspiration for simple living and new ways of thinking from the place where their journey together began, The New Alchemy Institute, in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. After a period of seeking their own community, they settled in to build their dream home at Common Ground.

The Birth of the Dragonfly

Too much living in a yurt convinced Daryl that clerestory windows (windows above eye-level) have major passive solar advantages over conventional skylights, because they allow winter sun to shine directly into the living space while blocking summer sun. He also wanted a cupola atop his home to house a solar hot water heater and provide ventilation. So, Daryl designed the house around these two features.

In the summer of 1989, the foundation was laid. Then, on Labor Day weekend, sixty people came from far and wide to raise the frame and accomplish a lot of work in a big heave-ho of community-supported-architecture! On June 8th, 1990, Sara & Daryl spent their first night in their new home. They then began their interior design process, hanging sheets where walls might go and visualizing other major elements, through which The Dragonfly gained comfort and sophistication, book nooks and three-way switches.

Although the exterior of the house has its own visual appeal, with strong angular lines perpendicular to the sun's

rays and an assortment of reflective, opaque, and transparent surfaces, the home's lovability lies with its functionality and technical excellence, which developed over time.

Migrating Off the Grid

Daryl ruefully admits the home actually started completely on the grid. Its first solar panels traveled with them from Cape Cod in 1986. The initial 170-watt array (collection of solar modules) powered little more than fans, CFL (compact fluorescent light) and LED lights, and a stereo.

More solar panels were added in batches, now totaling around 3,500 watts (3.5 kW) of photovoltaic capacity. In addition, the solar hot water heater transitioned from a simple thermo-siphoning system, which was prone to freezing and required a backup gas heater, to a more sophisticated drain-back system that integrates with their super-efficient wood stove.

Another important step was replacing old thrift-store appliances with energy efficient models. In this manner, the wattage provided by the solar panels began to eclipse wattage used in the house. Daryl pays close attention to balancing photovoltaic (PV) supply with electrical demand and battery storage, and they now only purchase electricity during extended cloudy periods, and even then, only to prevent the batteries from going below an optimal discharge threshold. In 2014, Sarah and Daryl purchased a total of 78 kWh of electricity from Alabama Power – that's about \$9 worth, folks!

If Alabama Power offered an option for net metering (selling surplus solar electricity back to the grid), Sara and Daryl would be *paid* as net producers of electricity. Many other providers, such as TVA, actually incentivize net metering.

Potential for Solar in Alabama

When Daryl started consulting in 1984, solar panels cost \$10/watt. Today's panels are around \$1/watt. Estimated equipment costs for an entire battery-based system like



Clockwise from far left: Sara Rose displays some herbal remedies; Cooking sweet potatoes in a solar oven; ducks have some fun in the yard; solar hot water heater monitor in action. All photos courtesy Wade Austin.

Daryl's, with all the necessary wiring, hardware, and an ample battery bank, will reach ~\$6 a watt. However, a simple grid-tied system could be purchased for half that price. So, you can see that the goal to get "off the grid" or "net zero" becomes a strong motivator toward employing integrated designs for efficiency and conservation.

By my rough estimates, a 10 kW "grid-tie" or 16 kW "off-grid" solar PV system would be necessary to meet the power demands of an average Alabama household. Meanwhile, The Dragonfly cruises by on 3.5 kW, no sweat. Daryl predicts that as battery prices drop, grid-tied systems with battery-backup will become more popular due to the energy independence they provide.

When The Dragonfly was newborn, it didn't know how to spell the word sustainable. It was just a shell of its future self and had a lot to learn about being a lovable abode. The prospect of having a home base that has learned how to pay its own utility bills has motivated Daryl to continue his work over the years, much like the idea of a home that provides much of its inhabitants' food and medicine has motivated Sara to continue gardening and raising ducks. Learning from nature is actually facilitated by living in a house that responds so integrally with the changing seasons. And, learning from the example of The Dragonfly, some possibilities emerge for those of us considering how best to live comfortably without wearing out the ecological fabric.

Find out for yourself why so many people love The Dragonfly – the Common Ground Community hosts a solar homes tour the first weekend in October!

GARDEN COLLECTIVE (CONTINUED)

(Continued from page 1)

The big-picture goal of the garden collective is getting participants to use their resources – material, physical, and human – to work together in order to start, maintain, and harvest gardens. The gardens are located at each individual family's home and the harvest is shared by the entire collective. These families have purchased seed and starter plants together, prepared soil and built raised beds, and purchased farming tools, including a large garden tiller. This community approach of sharing responsibility makes the garden work easier, more successful, and creates a natural platform to teach and learn from each other.

What is AAPDEP and why address food sovereignty? Huntsville, Alabama, and even the United States as a whole is just a small fraction of the area in the world where food injustice is taking place. AAPDEP is an or-



Photos from a workday with the AAPDEP's garden collective in Huntsville. Photos courtesy AAPDEP.

ganization that addresses the on-the-ground local problems, but also realizes the overall core cause of food injustice – as with any injustice in this world – is colonialism and imperialism. Until a people can control the wealth that is theirs from a homeland, and the wealth that they create through their physical work, they will never be able to control their food security, no matter how many community gardens or garden collectives they establish. With this understanding AAPDEP seeks to use the question of food security to challenge the greater question of a people's self-determination.


The All African Peoples Development and Empowerment Project, has addressed the food justice issue in many ways. This nonprofit 501c3 organization has for the last four years maintained a community garden in Houston's 5th Ward; taught young people in Washington D.C. technical skills and the importance of agriculture through the Marcus Garvey Enrichment Program; worked with farmers and fishermen in Sierra Leone, West Africa; and is in the process of initiating a garden a collective in Philadelphia

and partnering with a community garden in Oakland, California. We believe control of your food leads to control of your health and most importantly control of a people's self-determination.

The Huntsville garden collective is growing steadily and strong, and is primed to have more families join this year. With hard collective work and the will to take control of their lives in their own hands, AAPDEP and the families of Huntsville are establishing a model that can be used in many communities around the world. They are currently planning for planting this spring, and are looking forward to a great season and bountiful harvest.


For more information on the Huntsville garden collective or the All African People's Development and Empowerment Project, please contact us at: info@developmentforafrica.org, 256-281-1344, or www.developmentforafrica.org.

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SSAWG CONFERENCE WRAPS UP STINT IN ALABAMA, ASAN GIVES 29 SCHOLARSHIPS

Southern SAWG has swept through Alabama once again, hosting its annual region-wide Practical Tools and Solutions for Sustaining Family Farms Conference in Mobile, AL, for the second year in a two-year stint. The SSAWG Conference brings together sustainable farmers and sustainable ag advocates for several days of learning and training on everything from pastured pork to cut flowers to food hubs.

The impact of the conference sessions is rivaled only by the energy that attendees tap into by being part of the 1000-person crowd, the sense of being a part of a larger movement that's vibrant and dynamic and growing. The feeling hits so hard because so many sustainable farmers, especially those working rurally in the Deep South, feel like they're out there on their own, lacking available training and resources, and constantly feeling like oddballs for going against the grain of what's understood to be "conventional" (ie synthetic-intensive, industrial-model) farming.

So imagine suddenly finding yourself in a single building with 1000 other people who share your vision for an agriculture that lets nature lead; that sustains the livelihoods of farmers and farmworkers and restores rural economies; that feeds healthy bodies and healthy communities; and that embraces and fosters democracy, diversity, and justice at all levels. You can imagine, then, why many folks – serial SSAWGers and first-timers alike – refer to the

conference as "farmer church."

ASAN Scholarships

ASAN partnered with Whole Foods Market to provide scholarships for 29 Alabama farmers to attend the SSAWG conference. These farmers were young folks just getting started, hobby farmers looking to grow, long-time farmers interested in transitioning to more sustainable methods, and everything in between, but needed financial assistance in order to attend SSAWG.

Whole Foods is opening several new stores in Alabama in this year and next, including one in Mobile, and has a stake in training and supporting Alabama farmers who may be future suppliers of produce, meat, eggs, honey, and more. ASAN would like to express huge thanks to Whole Foods, on our own behalf and on behalf of the 29 scholarship recipients, for their generous support!

ASAN Member Dinner

A highlight of the weekend in Mobile was the ASAN member dinner at The Noble South restaurant in Mobile on January 16, 2015. One benefit of ASAN membership is invitation to occasional members-only events, and the turnout for this one was even stronger than we anticipated! The at-capacity crowd of more than 60 ASAN members filled



Clockwise from bottom left: Natilee McGruder staffs the ASAN trade show booth; ASAN scholarship recipients, photo credit Frannie Kenworthy Griffin; ASAN members dig into the food at The Noble South; Chef Chris Rainosek introduces the meal.



the restaurant, which opened in mid-2014 under of Chef Chris Rainosek. We enjoyed drinks and socializing and were treated to an extraordinary dinner of shrimp and grits, pork loin, brussels sprouts, and blackeye pea hummus, all prepared using local ingredients by Chef Chris (who, incidentally, was part of a panel at the SSAWG Conference the very next day, speaking on chef/farmer collaborations!).

Sadly, SSAWG's time in Alabama is done (for now at least), as next year the 25th annual conference will be held in Lexington, KY. It may not be in our backyard anymore, but you better believe we'll still be there!

THANK YOU to the more than 80 individuals, households and farms who donated as part of our 2014 End-of-Year Fundraising Campaign! Together you contributed more than \$4000 to ASAN!

We can't do what we do without our members. If you have yet to join or your membership is due for renewal, please go to www.asanonline.org/contribute or turn to page 15, and join ASAN today!

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Under the Bridge in Gulf Shores



NEWS FROM YOUR NEIGHBORS

Our friendly neighborhood timber framer, **Wade Austin**, is happy to report that he will be trading his chisel for a garden hoe this spring! He will be joining the Farm School teaching team at Camp McDowell for the task of helping our digital youth re-connect with their sustainable farming heritage!

Amanda Storey has joined the staff of Jones Valley Teaching Farm (JVTF) in Birmingham, as Director of Partnerships. Amanda will work to secure new local, regional, federal, and national funding partners, develop and maintain strategic community and school-based alliances, manage donor relationships, and connect Jones Valley Teaching Farm to health, food, and education-focused coalitions currently working at the local, state, and national levels. Most recently, Amanda served as the Assistant Director at the Community Food Bank of Central Alabama. Amanda can be reached at amanda@jvtf.org.

EAT South in Montgomery thanks and celebrates **Mark Bowen**, who has served as EAT South's Education Coordinator for the past 4.5 years. Mark will be continuing his education at Appalachian State University, where he will study Marriage and Family Therapy in order to become a full-time horticultural therapist. Mark spearheaded EAT South's summer youth employment program, *Can You Dig It!*? and taught students and teachers through the *Sprouts K-5* school gardens and *Good Food Day* field trip programs. Mark's dedication and passion for education have inspired the communities he's served, and have been

instrumental to EAT South. Mark may be contacted at mark@eatsouth.org.

At Hartselle's **Happy Heart Market**, there were always delightful folks who stopped in for the wonderful local fare. Happy Heart closed back in October, but owner **Kim Prince** is excited to continue as a link for good people and fresh local food. When the Decatur-Morgan County farmers market opens in April, look for her, the new market manager! Buy Local, Eat Fresh, & Be Happy!

These sections appear in every newsletter and feature updates both personal and professional, on ASAN members and friends: anything from a new farm, to a new baby.

They make existing resources known to others, and help spread the word for those looking to connect. Connecting people in this, the barest-bones of ways, we hope to provide a jumping-off point for folks to connect on their own in deeper ways.

Have something you want us to publish? Get in touch at alice@asanonline.org or (256) 743-0742.

Benford Lepley of Harvest Roots Farm (Falkville/Hartselle) recently returned to his native soil in New York. While farm partners Pete and Lindsay will miss all that Benford brought to the business, they are excited for his new adventures and the upcoming third season of Harvest Roots Farm.

Congratulations to **Will Doonan and Liz Meyer** of Heron Hollow Farm in Falkville, who are expecting their second child in March!

CLASSIFIEDS & RESOURCES

Moore Farms and Friends is starting a new Farmhouse Supper Club, with monthly fixed-price dinners (\$40, \$10 kids menu) held on the farm. Email for calendar dates and reservations! Moore Farms in Woodland, farm@moorefarmsandfriends.com

Michelle French Design wants to help ASAN members market themselves better. Strong visuals and a focused campaign are effective ways to bring the right audience to your business. Michelle, who designed our Food and Farm Forum graphics, can create logos, printed materials, packaging, and web sites that showcase your product. She can guide you through the social media maze and help you hone your communication strategy. Contact Michelle at 404-661-9474 / michelle@michellefrenchdesign.com.

UPCOMING EVENTS

DETAILS FOR THESE EVENTS AND MORE, AT WWW.ASANONLINE.ORG/EVENTS

March 5-8 – Selma

Bridge Crossing Jubilee and Jubilee Film Festival

50th Anniversary of Bloody Sunday, the Selma to Montgomery March, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

March 8 — Ashland

Hoochee Poosa Locavores Meeting

Potluck dinner and meeting combined, with a springtime cleansing theme.

March 9-13 – Selma / Montgomery

Selma to Montgomery March

Reenactment of historic 54-mile march first made in 1965.

March 7 – Tuscaloosa

Container Gardening Workshop

Hosted by Druid City Garden Project.

March 14 — Phenix City

Outreach Meeting

On food safety, NRCS cost-share programs, new/beginning farmers, and more.

March 14 — Silverhill

Composting Workshop

Hosted by Blue Moon Farm, led by Mike Healy.

March 19-21 – Columbiana

Environmental Education Association of Alabama 2015 Conference



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Not sure if you need to renew? Check your address label to see when your membership expires.

Please mail checks made out to ASAN to:
 PO Box 2127, Montgomery, AL 36102.

UPCOMING EVENTS (CONT'D)

(Continued from page 14)

March 20 — Goodman, MS

Alliance Field Day

Free monthly trainings held at the Alliance for Sustainable Ag Production's demo farm.

March 21 — Eufaula

Peer-to-Peer High Tunnel Training

Series of free workshops held at S&B Farms, to help farmers develop the potential of their tunnel houses / high tunnels.

March 21 — Blountsville

Lactofermentation Workshop

Learn to preserve the harvest to maximize taste and health benefits.

March 25 — Eutaw

Direct Marketing for Farmers Workshop

Hosted by ACES.

March 25 — Tuscaloosa

Talk: Dismantling Racism in the Food System

Speaker will be Eric Holt-Gimenez of the Oakland-based nonprofit Food First.

March 26 — Tuscaloosa

Vegetable and Fruit Production and Food Safety Workshop

Free workshop led by ACES.

March 26 — Tuscaloosa

Roundtable: Building an Inclusive Food Movement

Featuring Eric Holt-Gimenez (see Mar 25) and local leaders including ASAN's Alice Evans.

March 29 — Huntsville

Farm and Fleece Day

Annual free festival hosted by the Tennessee Valley Women in Agriculture.

April 4-June 20 — Somerville

Permaculture Design Course: Spring

Course taught every Saturday for 12 weeks (in a series) by the AL Permaculture Network.

April 4 — Moundville

Saturdays in the Park: Basketmaking

Workshop series hosted by Moundville Archaeological Park.

April 4 — Florence

8th Annual Shoals Earth Day Fest

Hosted by Shoals Earth Month in Wilson Park.

April 6 — Tuscaloosa

Alabama Cottage Food Law Food Safety Training

April 7 — Birmingham

Connect to your Coast: Birmingham

Part of Gulf-to-table dinner series hosted by the Alabama Coastal Foundation.

April 9 — Camden

Let's Move Farm Camp

Hosted by Women and Youth in Agriculture and Let's Move Selma.

April 11 — Tuscaloosa

Intro to Organic Gardening Pt 1

Hosted by the Druid City Garden Project.

April 11 — Moundville

Saturdays in the Park: Weaving

April 11-12 — North Alabama

Tennessee Valley Farm Tour (See p.5)

April 14 — Linden

Direct Marketing for Farmers Workshop

April 15 — Mobile

Whole Foods Market Supplier Fair

For potential vendors for new Whole Foods in Mobile. Appointment required.

(Continued on page 16)

ASAN

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UPCOMING EVENTS (CONT'D)

(Continued from page 15)

April 15 — Birmingham

Beehive Design Collective Workshop

Hosted by ASAN in collaboration with many partner organizations.

April 16-18 — Knoxville, TN

National Women in Ag Symposium

April 17 — Birmingham

Birmingham Food Summit

April 17 — Goodman, MS

Alliance Field Day

April 18 — Eufaula

Peer-to-Peer High Tunnel Training

April 18 — Selma

Mill Village Fundraiser + Community Day

For the Mill Village Community Garden and Food Park, a project of Grow Selma.

April 18 — Fairhope

Earth Day Mobile Bay

Held at the Fairhope Pier rain or shine.

April 19 — Huntsville

Earth Day Festival and Farmers Market

In Monte Sano State Park.

April 25 — Moundville

Saturdays in the Park: Natural Fibers

April 28 — Montgomery

Healthy Food Access Advocacy Day

Hosted by VOICES for Alabama's Children in support of their Healthy Food Financing Initiative.

May 2 — Spanish Fort

Taste of the Farm Annual Farm Fundraiser Dinner

Hosted by Seasons in the Sun Farm.

May 2-3 — Montgomery

Southern Makers

Festival celebrating Alabama's artisans, this year expanded to two days.

May 15 — Goodman, MS

Alliance Field Day

May 16 — Eufaula

Peer-to-Peer High Tunnel Training

May 16 — Tuscaloosa

Organic Gardening 102

Hosted by the Druid City Garden Project.

May 18 — Carrollton

Alabama Cottage Food Law Food Safety Training

May 24-30 — Asheville, NC

Wild Food and Fermentation Workshop with Sandor Katz

June 4 — Livingston

Alabama Cottage Food Law Food Safety Training