



ORGANIC FARMERS
ASSOCIATION

Finding Balance in the Field

By Tianna Neal



Eight years ago, I embarked on a journey that had always seemed out of reach for me. It was my very first visit to a farm that inspired me to take on a role in this demanding work of food production. Welcomed to the land by an elderly couple that had owned and operated a certified organic vegetable farm in my community, I fell into deep admiration for the hands behind our food. From there on, this experienced couple became my teachers, taking me under their wings and showing me the ways of organic vegetable farming. I continued to dive deeper into the realm of agriculture, pursuing a degree in agribusiness, working community gardens, training other aspiring farmers, and taking on positions in land conservation.

I was once oblivious to how food was produced and all of the elements involved in sustaining a food system, but through this immersion the extensive issues present in our food systems began to gradually reveal themselves to me. I began noticing the discrepancies that have more than likely contributed to my ignorance of agriculture in my youth, such as the inequitable access to quality produce, the lack of education in agriculture, and the inadequate recognition of farmers.

My farm business, Starlit Roots, was established with the mission to (1) sustain the food system and (2) sustain the land. We achieve this by growing food for our community using practices that restrict the use of synthetic chemicals, conserve natural resources, and prioritize our environmental impact. Our USDA Organic Certification is only a small representation of the value of our crops, which are deeply rooted in respect for the land and the people. While the mission is unwavering and the standards are easy to uphold, the real challenge is presented in the execution of our business model.

Once production began, I realized that I could not grow enough to fulfill the needs of all the households, the markets, and the interested buyers seeking more vegetables. There was a constant demand that I failed to supply every season. Driven by my passion to sustain the local food system, I imposed upon myself the responsibility to resolve the shortage.



Starlit Roots - Burke County, Georgia

I kept setting goals for myself to produce more, attend more markets, and secure new buyers. When there is an increase in production, there's an increase in inputs. When we reflect on the inputs that go into food production, we immediately consider the tangible resources such as seed, fertilizer, equipment, fuel, etc. However, the intangible resources required for such an increase tend to hold the greatest value, yet they come at an unquantifiable cost.

In the first three years of operation, I failed to value myself as a resource. Much of my energy was focused on tending to a workload that never met completion. As with most newly established businesses, no profit was generated and I had to rely on off-farm jobs to make a living wage.

Like many other aspiring and beginning farmers, I had to juggle the demands of my business, my career, my family, and my personal life, without losing my grip. It was embedded in me that if I were to “lose my grip” in any of these fields, I’d be a failure to those who I serve.

I was the entire team for Starlit Roots—the owner, manager, laborer, accountant, marketing specialist, equipment operator, and every position in between. The farm simply did not run without me, so the pressure I put on the business was solely pressure applied to myself. I called upon help during the times I needed it most, such as a large planting or harvest. However, I was not yet profitable enough to pay workers consistently and build a team that I could delegate my workload to.

Through a farm business development program that I was recently accepted into, my very supportive and insightful consultant asked me the most daunting question. She wanted to know if I consistently paid myself. I’d been asked this question by consultants in the past, and I’d always let out a laugh that probably sounded like a cry for help. However, this most recent ask wasn’t humorous. It revealed to me that, as long as I’m failing to compensate myself for the time, energy, and labor spent, then the business is unsustainable. I am the most valuable resource in this operation, therefore, when I am depleted, I am incapable of contributing to the business in my greatest capacity.

Depletion doesn’t appear harmful when it is in the name of service. I often say that if I were farming to make a profit, I wouldn’t be farming. This statement is backed by my determination to be a reliable source of organic produce for the community. I am farming to feed people. It is this same determination that led me to increase production beyond my means. I’ve witnessed the same determination in the elder farmers that trained me in this work, for they too have depleted themselves in the name of serving our community. By the end of each summer, they finally catch their breath and question whether they can afford to produce at this scale again next year. It is the intangible costs in question—whether they can afford the mental and physical stress associated with the level of production.

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In our late season conversations we'll speak on our hardships, and they'll inform me that they will slow down production the following year and only plant crops that are easily manageable. Yet from my perspective, it appears they grow even more than the year prior, and the pattern persists year after year. While our common motive is rooted in being of service, we are unfortunately creating an environment of self-neglect and undercompensation across generations of farmers.

Agricultural history reveals to us that even in the face of oppression, farmers have maximized the resources available to them to feed their families and communities and keep their farm businesses in production. The downside to this narrative is that many of these farmers ran themselves into a hole in efforts to keep producing.

Due to the high prevalence of stress among farmers, we must recognize it as a collective challenge in our food system. Concerning ourselves with how farmers deal with stress is one approach; however, an approach that is more within our sphere of influence is minimizing stress.

Organizations that provide farmer support have been successful in their support because they have listened to the needs of their farmers and created funds to target specific needs. Examples include emergency funds, labor assistance, infrastructure grants, financial education, and business consultation. In providing equitable access to these resources, these organizations have created opportunities for farmers that have been historically underserved, and are contributing to the success of the next generations of farmers. Many of the organizations providing support are nonprofits and are reliant upon grant funding to keep these programs functional. Considering that these organizations have become critical in providing farmer support, they need our continued support.

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Additionally, we must advocate for further governmental support towards reducing farmer stress, as they are also committed to securing the national food system. In establishing policy that addresses the identified threats to farmer stress, then we are directly stabilizing food production. We have the resources needed to relieve farmers of their stresses and enable them to continue growing, it is now a matter of how we will allocate these resources. In sustaining the health and well-being of our producers, we are sustaining the food system that remains forever dependent upon them. 🌱



Located in Burke County, Georgia, Starlit Roots, LLC is a farm committed to growing, producing, and distributing organically grown, seasonal vegetable crops. Embedded in the heart of Starlit Roots is Tianna Rose, an organic farmer, educator, and steward of the land, that is driven by the sustainability of our food systems.