



# Leah Penniman: Farming while Black: Soul Fire Farm's practical guide to liberation on the land

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How can the experiences of a Black farmer serve to uplift new generations of Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) growers? In *Farming While Black*, Leah Penniman answers this, providing “the book I needed someone to write for me when I was a teen who incorrectly believed that choosing a life on the land would be a betrayal of my ancestors and of my Black community” (9). With passionate prose, Penniman spotlights the voices, principles, and strategies of Black farmers who have long struggled to fight racism, achieve autonomy, and improve BIPOC’s access to land and nutritious food. Penniman’s experience founding Soul Fire Farms, a continuation and expansion of years of work in sustainable agriculture and food and racial justice, feeds her ground-level insight into the practical strategies of organizing a sustainable farm, connecting food and racial justice, and linking practices back to traditions of Africa and the diaspora.

The volume’s introductory chapter situates Penniman’s positionality as a mixed-race Black woman with a long commitment to racial justice, initially disconnected from agriculture due to the narrative of Black Americans’ relationship to farming being one of enslavement and/or sharecropping. Through a brief history of Black agricultural activism and its import to Black liberation movements, she explains how learning this history encouraged her to engage with food justice. Rooted in her political values, Penniman describes how she founded Soul Fire Farm as a way to confront the *food apartheid*—food deserts named by their systemic and purposive existence—that her family experienced in the South

End of Albany, New York. Penniman further describes Soul Fire Farms’ other anti-racist activism—their Youth Food Justice program, challenging the school to prison pipeline, and Black Latinx Farmers Immersion, a training program to spread the farm’s knowledge and praxis.

The book then imparts practical knowledge, with the first twelve chapters rooted in farming best practices. Chapter 1 “Finding Land and Resources” outlines how to gain access to the “three essential ingredients [aspiring farmers need] to begin: training, land, and material resources” (p. 12). Chapter 2 “Planning Your Farm Business” provides information on worker-owned “Ujamaa” or cooperative economic business models, community-share agriculture and food hubs, communal labor practices, and writing a farm business plan. In “Honoring the Spirits of the Land,” Chapter 3 draws from primarily Vodou and Yoruba Ifa traditions as it explores the role of sacred literature and provides examples of planting and harvesting rituals, herbal baths, and songs and chants in farming practice. Chapter 4 discusses “Restoring Degraded Land” including lead remediation, healing erosion with terraces, agroforestry for soil restoration, and no-till and biological tilling. Chapter 5 “Feeding the Soil” promotes strategies of improving soil fertility to facilitate “healing from colonialism” (p. 87) as US soils have faced decades of degradation through settler-colonialists’ tillage. Chapter 6 covers crop planning, with profuse information provided on annual plants, polyculture, and crop rotation. The equipment needed for bed preparation, transplanting and direct seeding, irrigation, weeding and crop maintenance, harvesting, and apparel and gear are covered in Chapter 7 “Tools and Technology.” Chapter 8 highlights the practice of “Seed Keeping” including ethical considerations for engaging in the practice, advice on keeping a seed garden, and discussion of seed harvest and the enriching practice of seed sharing. “Raising Animals,” including chickens for eggs, chickens for meat, and pigs is covered in Chapter 9. Chapter 10 then turns

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to “Plant Medicine,” with extensive information on species to grow, keeping an herb garden, and methods of preparing herbs. Chapter 11 concerns “Urban Farming,” including issues of laws and land access, soil and water cleanliness, taking advantage of small spaces, and fostering community. Chapter 12 addresses post-harvest processes through “Cooking and Preserving,” abundant with culturally rich recipes, food preservation methods, and strategies to maximize scarce resources.

The final four chapters shift emphasis to the activist potential of farming. Soul Fire Farm’s Youth Food Justice program is foregrounded in Chapter 13 “Youth on Land.” The chapter also outlines best practices for engaging youth in agricultural activism and the development of youth food justice curriculums. Building on this activist emphasis, Chapter 14 discusses “Healing From Trauma,” first providing a timeline of racial trauma in US agriculture, then turning to internalized racism and strategies for healing. Chapter 15 covers approaches from litigation to education to mutual aid to direct action in its examination of food and racial “Movement Building.” Finally, Chapter 16 shifts to “White People Uprooting Racism,” engaging with discussion of reparations, interracial alliances, organizational transformation, and personal development.

To provide inspiration and celebrate Black farmers, throughout all chapters are sections titled “Uplift”—vignettes that highlight histories of Black agricultural activism; traditional African and diasporic farming and labor strategies; people, animals, or plants that have great import to Black agriculturalists; and stories of Black farmers’ spiritual and/or cultural practices. The “Uplift” sections ground each topic Penniman discusses in concrete, culturally-relevant examples; For instance, the work of “George Washington Carver” on regenerative agriculture is uplifted in Chapter 5 “Feeding the Soil”, and the “Sacred Herbalism of Cuba and Haiti” is highlighted in Chapter 10 “Plant Medicine.”

Methodologically, *Farming while Black* utilizes Penniman’s personal experience, knowledge passed to her by fellow Black activist-farmers, and legacies of global Black agricultural traditions and food activism. Penniman’s work is unique in that she herself is not an academic, but rather, in the Black feminist tradition, an ‘intellectual’ with knowledge gained through lived experience. Her text serves to empower Black farmers as much as it imparts practical, historical and sociocultural knowledge of farming. *Farming while Black* is a celebration of Black farmers, honoring the connections between African and diasporic ancestral agricultural traditions, the history of Black food activism, and modern fights for racial and food justice. Yet any people interested in operating a farm founded on decolonial, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, food sovereignty, and socially-embedded producer–consumer values would benefit greatly from its thorough blueprint for doing so. Thus, while best suited as a practical guide to farming, the book should be considered for upper division or graduate courses on Black liberation, Black activist praxis, food justice, or other courses in need of an excellent case-study of a praxis-focused text.

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