Amyrose Foll

Virginia Free Farm - Kents Store, Virginia

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Sarah Rodriguez: This is Sarah Rodriguez with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is October 18, 2024. We're here in–where are we technically?

Amyrose Foll: Kents Store, Virginia.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. At Virginia Free Farm. Do you mind introducing yourself for the tape?

Amyrose Foll: I am Amyrose Foll, and I'm the executive director of Virginia Free Farm and the site director for the Richmond Food Rescue Hub.

Sarah Rodriguez: Great. Could you share when and where were you born?

Amyrose Foll: I was born in Erie, Pennsylvania, but I've been here in Virginia for 20 years almost. I'm a southerner at heart. I got here as soon as I could. But yeah, I spent my youth in the Allegheny Mountains on Lake Erie. You could see Canada from the beach where I grew up. I was in the Army, which brought me down here, and I ended up going back to school back up there, and there was something about Virginia that just always felt like home, and I felt like this place was, like, calling me back.

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So, even when I was in school up there, when I was in my early 20s, I was scheming to get back here, and I finally made it back by my mid-20s. So, now, I've been here for about 20 years.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. When were you born?

Amyrose Foll: 1980.

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Sarah Rodriguez: And who did you grow up with in your household?

Amyrose Foll: Extended family, cousins, uncles, grandma. We had a family lodge in the Allegheny Mountains, and every waking moment that I was not involved in some sort of school sports or figure skating, I was fishing, trapping, and hunting or foraging with my father and my grandmother. We were a big outdoors family. My uncle married into a family with a dairy farm. We had all girls, and I was the youngest girl, so I had to do all the crap work and crap jobs, and foraged for my grandmother.

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My grandmother made traditional medicines. And then, her and many of the other older women–we had a very close-knit community where everyone's grandma was everyone else's grandma, which was great because I got a culinary education from these women that some people would kill for. And a lot of the older women were–my grandmother would grow peaches, and plums, and rhubarb, and raspberries, peppers, tomatoes. And then the lady on the other side of the alley had a vineyard, she cured–she had, like, a little salumeria, which was terrifying as a small child when you don't understand the science of what's going on. Now, it's fascinating as an adult. But she was a refugee here from Italy after World War II. She was an older woman, and she grew grapes, she cured meats, she had figs in Erie, Pennsylvania, which is crazy. They dig them up and bury them, which is fascinating.

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And that family is still doing it. Some of them came to visit me this past year and brought me some great seed gifts that we're growing out here now in Virginia. Garlic, onions, all that sort of stuff. And then, all of the women would trade, and then all of us girls in the

neighborhood–because pretty much everyone that went to the same church knew each other, and all of the girls were, like, kind of farmed out to other people's kitchens. So, we would be packing tons of green beans, and tons of tomato sauce, and preserving everything, drying, preserving, canning. It was so great. I hated it at the time. But now, hindsight–I was a dumb kid. I didn't understand the gift I was being given as a child. Even with just the foraging aspect–I would spend all day in the National Forest. I know people that are listening to this can't see, but it's maybe 20 feet from where we're sitting at this picnic table on my farm, it was maybe 20 feet away from the front porch of our family lodge to the National Forest, and I knew the woods like the back of my hand.

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And I would be gathering buckets of wild blueberries, or elderberries, or crayfish, or turtles, all sorts of different things to bring back. Mountain men, sweet everlasting, whatever my grandmother needed that was in season at the time, I had to go gather and bring back. And we didn't have running water, so I had to be getting water from the spring on my banana seat bicycle. And being outside, and learning all those plants, and learning what was food and what was medicine, and not just some background fodder for our eyes was really fascinating, and it's amazing how I've been able to incorporate that into my farm business and teach others with that. I didn't really see much value in it when I was younger, but now, there are a lot of people–like, the tribes I work with here in Virginia are very interested in traditional food ways. I was at the Pamunkey Reservation last week, I took them a bunch of seeds, and then we went riding around to look at sites to survey for gardens.

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A forest garden and a traditional medicine garden, which is going to be awesome. As well as regular food gardens, tomatoes, peppers, all the staples that everyone loves to have fresh. Which is really great. It's useful to me now, and I can help others learn about those things.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's awesome. Could you tell me a bit about your family background? Are they from Pennsylvania?

Amyrose Foll: No, actually, my mother's family came here during World War II from Austria. They were trying to get away from that mess. My father's family is actually aboriginal Canadian. They were Odanak First Nations, and one of my great grandparents is Penobscot. I cannot remember which one of my grandmothers' parents is Penobscot, but she was born up in Maine on the Penobscot Reservation, and then they lived in Quebec.

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And my father was in the Navy, and traveled around, and ended up in Pennsylvania, and met my mom at a roller-skating rink. [Laugh] And they settled down. And here I am today. There's a joke in my family that because my father's family has been here for millennia, and my mother's family is, in the grand scheme of things, pretty fresh in this country, that when my grandparents got here, my father's family was waiting on the shores to welcome them with open arms.

Sarah Rodriguez: I love that. That's so cool.

Amyrose Foll: And it's really funny because my mother's mother ended up being, like, best friends with my dad. [Laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: No way.

Amyrose Foll: Yes. Two totally different worlds, but they were thick as thieves.

Sarah Rodriguez: Love that.

Amyrose Foll: Yeah, it was great.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me a bit more about your process of coming down to Virginia? You said you really wanted to be here.

Amyrose Foll: Oh, yeah. Well, my first foray into Virginia was against my will. [Laugh] I was stationed down here in the Army.

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But because I grew up in such a cold place–you could see **Dobson** Ontario from the beach where I grew up, Presque Isle, little spit of land that sticks out into the Lake, into Lake Erie. So, on a clear day–or if you go to the amusement park, from the top of the rollercoaster, you can also see it. Even though I grew up in such a cold place, I absolutely hate cold weather. I hate the snow, I don't want anything to do with the snow. So, Central Virginia is perfect. I am half an hour from West of Richmond, 25 minutes from the east end of Charlottesville, but I'm in this beautiful, like, bucolic, rural area that is just ideal. And the growing season in the South is so much better. Especially, since here where I am–I'm in one of the tiny pockets in Virginia that is Zone 6b. And one of the things that I do–my family's from up north. Maple sugar production is a traditional native food, maple syrup, maple sugar work.

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Traditionally, it was boiled down to granules, not, like, the liquid. The liquid would be enjoyed when it was first boiled down, but that's, like, what we're familiar with. There are so many more aspects of sugar work. You can tap trees for about five–I usually watch the weather really

closely. Only in this little area and in the highlands in Virginia, you can tap trees, so we tap walnuts, hickory, a bunch of maples, and some alders across the street in our forest garden. And I'm teaching my son to do it. He's been working his own little, like, blended syrup sugar bush since he was 12, and now he's 15. So, I'm really thankful for that because then I can keep that tradition alive in my family. Because food is, like–I don't know, everybody eats. Food is–it tells the story of who we are. That's why I do seeds. Seeds are amazing storytellers. I'm so fascinated about the stories behind seeds and how they have evolved, and changed, and gone across the ocean and come back, and everything in between. It's amazing.

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Sarah Rodriguez: When did you decided you wanted to settle in Virginia? You said you came down here, you were stationed down here.

Amyrose Foll: Yeah, I went back home to go to college, and those winters are brutal. I was in nursing school, and there was one day–I went to school from 1 to 7 in the afternoon. There was one day it started snowing, and things up north are not like they are here. Down south here, like, there's a threat of snow or even ice in the morning, and schools are closed. That doesn't happen where I come from. There'll be, like, three feet of snow in three hours, and nobody bats an eye. And I'm being a bit facetious by saying that. But ask any northerner, they'll probably tell you, it's pretty close to the truth. There was one day in nursing school, at the end of the day–our parking lot was kind of up on a hill, and we all got out. I think they might've let us out a little bit early. We had to dig our cars out, and we basically kind of finagled, like, "Okay, who's got a four-wheel drive pickup truck?"

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I had a little Volkswagen Golf that was super low to the ground. We were digging our cars out, and then we kind of organized ourselves into, like, the smallest students to the largest students. And, like, the smallest people got into their cars and got pushed out first, and then the pickup truck people left last so that we could all make it home. [Laugh] I have no interest in that ever again.

Sarah Rodriguez: Understandable.

Amyrose Foll: [Laugh] So, immediately, I started scheming. But Virginia is beautiful. And I've reluctantly broken myself of saying pop. Now, I say soda. And I say y'all. [Laugh] I didn't even realize, it gradually happened. I stopped saying davenport, and vacuum sweeper, and wastepaper basket. And now, I'm kind of, like, totally in the Virginia colloquial terms. I didn't even realize that it happened to me. But I love Virginia. It's home to me, even though nobody in my family is from here.

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I absolutely love it, and I've met the best people in my life here.

Sarah Rodriguez: How did you end up getting into farming? You mentioned going out and finding food anyways growing up. What made you decide to take on this?

Amyrose Foll: Well, we always grew–one of my first most vivid memories of childhood–and I don't even know why because I obviously didn't know what I was doing. Everybody in my family would garden, all of the people in my neighborhood would garden. And like I was saying, little old ladies would trade stuff. But I remember there was this great, big Douglas fir tree in my backyard that I would climb up to the top of. And it was so big, I had, like, a play area and a picnic table underneath it, but it was completely–like, you couldn't see in because it was so old

and the way the branches grew. If I climbed up to the top, I was easily above the roof line of our two-story house.

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But I had this little area that I secreted away in between that and a sycamore tree, and I made a little garden. And I was, like, going around–you know when you think back on childhood, all your memories are foggy? This is, like, the first really vivid one I had. Other than falling out of my dad's boat. [Laugh] But that's a different story for a different day. So, you know the little cleistogamous pods on the bottom of common violets that are so fertile? I was gathering those up and drying them, and then taking strawberries and, like, scraping the seeds off the outside. And I had prepared this little bed. Now, I don't know whether it was dumb luck, or birds depositing seeds, or whatever, but things grew. And obviously, the strawberries were probably just deposited from squirrels or birds because they would've had to be stratified anyway, so it wouldn't have gone through the thing. But things grew for me, and I got really excited about that.

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And, like, that's something I feel like I'll never forget. I've had so many other experiences in life, but that is my really first very vivid early childhood memory, and I've just been obsessed with plants. It's probably a little bit of ADHD. When I was working as a nurse in Richmond, I was hustling at the farmer's market on weekends because I would inevitably garden too much. You can only give your neighbors so many tomatoes, and peppers, and zucchini. And we all know what happens with zucchini in the summertime in the South. You have to hide it in people's cars, on their doorsteps, run away. [Laugh] Too much zucchini. But yeah, I just started hustling at the farmer's market when I first moved here. I've got, shoot, between this property and the one over

there, probably 400 animals now, around 60 acres, and six beehives. And it all started with an overabundance of a garden and eight chickens 20 years ago.

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But everyone knows what chicken math amounts to. Start with a couple, it's, like, the gateway drug to farming. It's terrible.

Sarah Rodriguez: Were you living in Richmond at the time?

Amyrose Foll: No, I was living in Ashland, so a little bit more rural. Although, I did live in Richmond for a very short period of time. I was living on Grace Street, and I had chickens on my fire escape until I got in trouble and kicked out, so that's why I ended up in Ashland. 7 o'clock in the morning, my landlord's like, "What's with the chickens?" That was not good. I wasn't supposed to have chickens.

Sarah Rodriguez: In the city.

Amyrose Foll: Phantom chickens in cages on the fire escape. It was kind of ridiculous.

Sarah Rodriguez: And when did you get this property?

Amyrose Foll: This property, we moved to about a year and a half ago. We started across the street at that house, where the pigs, and our herd sires for the goats, and ducks, and chickens are. We've got some ducks and geese milling about. Oh, there's one duck out in the corner.

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He's sad because he can't go be with his friends. He's a dummy for getting out. And then, we've got our milking goats over here, and some of our seed trout gardens are across the street. And a wood lot as well. We've got two homes and about 24 acres across the street I believe, something

along the lines of that, where we have a forest garden, and seed gardens, and whatnot, an orchard, some grapes. Grapes need to be cleaned up. But yeah, it just kind of–every time a lot next to us would come up for sale, I would just roll the equity from my original house into that and just keep going and going. And now, we're over here, we've got trails that go around here, and the woods–we're fixing to have hunters come set up tree stands here soon. They've already been in touch with us. Which is another revenue stream for farmers if they're looking for multiple streams of income. I always advocate–when I used to be the director of farmer training for Future Harvest, I would always advocate that people have multiple revenue streams so they can be adaptive, and agile, and move with the market, and make sure that they are successful in their farming lives.

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But yeah, and I love food, I love feeding people. Our farm's a nonprofit, so we don't sell any of our food, and we give most of our seeds away. We do have a little seed shop on Etsy, which is a lot of our income. We write small grants, and then we get small individual donations. We've got dedicated volunteers that show up every Wednesday that are more like family now than volunteers. And they've been volunteering with us for 10 years. But yeah, it just turned into–I just can't stop. I think I'm turning into my grandma. I love feeding people. We didn't have a lot of money growing up, but literally, you couldn't go near my grandmother's house–even if you told her that you weren't hungry, you couldn't go near her house without being force-fed something. [talks to husband]

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Amyrose Foll: Oh, gosh, you've only asked, like, two questions, and I've been yammering this whole time.

Sarah Rodriguez: No, no, no, this is great. It's easy when you've already got these ideas and these stories.

Amyrose Foll: I have a lot of crazy ideas in my crazy head. [Laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: Nothing better.

Amyrose Foll: That's what happened. This came about, rolling the farmer's market–like, I started doing farmer's markets on the weekend while I was working full-time.

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I worked as a nurse during the day and firefighter at night, but it was great because for a while, I was working for Hanover County at the Pamunkey Regional Jail as a nurse during the day, and then I worked at the fire department at night. And the Garcia schedule was set up–I worked for a different county's fire department. And it was set up so I was going one 12-hour shift right to the next shift just, for, like, three days, and then I have all this time off, and it was fantastic. I don't know, I love this. I love being outside. And after having kids, daycare is so expensive, and I can kind of just make my own schedule and be present in my children's lives. Even though I made great money as a nurse, it was all gone to daycare at the end of the week, I felt like. It was more than my mortgage. It was outrageous. I do not understand how people do it, especially single moms that have to have their kids in daycare.

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I don't understand. It's so expensive. But I was lucky that I went from farmer's market to wholesale accounts with a lot of restaurants in Richmond, Charlottesville, and Fredericksburg, a couple of, like, specialty grocery stores. So, like, between Wednesday and Friday, I would, like, make my rounds, and I'd try and usually do it all in the same day. And then, just transitioning into the Free Farm and applying for 501(c)(3) nonprofit status and becoming a nonprofit has probably been the best thing that has ever happened to me. Like, I love it. I love feeding people.

Sarah Rodriguez: When did you become a nonprofit?

Amyrose Foll: 2019. Yeah. And we had been trying to figure out–we'd already been giving food away before then. Oh, my gosh. I have a really hard time asking for help. Let me tell you, no one works harder than a woman that's too proud to ask for help.

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I was doing everything from prepping, planting, picking, packing to delivering and coordinating, like, pickups all by myself the first year. I almost lost my mind. Don't do that. Anybody listening to this, do not do it alone. We are meant to live in a community with other human beings. No matter what corner of the globe our families come from, whether it's Ireland, Indonesia, or North America, we all evolved in tribes and clan systems for a reason. [Laugh] Don't do it alone. Farming alone is so hard. I have, like, an amazing community here of badass–mostly women, weirdly enough. There's a bunch of female farmers around here that I have been able to say, "Hey, I've got to break down a hog. Can you meet me at my house in 20 minutes?" And I've never had anyone tell me no. And it's been really great because then, I'll go over and help process chickens, or Derek will go and help mill lumber.

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It's been the best thing. One of the most important things you can have in your life is your cache of people. Not, like, your seed stores, or money in the bank, or anything else, but the people. And it's really allowed me to have the time to be able to implement better farming strategies without being rushed. And because of that, I haven't tilled since 2013. We have a tiller that we loan out to community gardens or other farmers that are getting started, but having that community has allowed me to farm in a good way in a more concerted manner without having to rush, or worry about, like, cutting corners, or any things like that. It's been the best thing. Now, I understand why the Amish are so big on community. Everyone always thinks about, like, Amish barn raising and how fascinating it is to see those men bust their humps and throw up a barn in a matter of days, or a day, or what have you.

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That's why we're supposed to be living like that. But we don't. We don't see our neighbors or know our neighbors a lot of the times anymore. But yeah, I've found so many people that are willing to, like, put in work, and time, and intention to help me feed people. It's been the best thing ever. And other farmers also donating as well, and driving, and everything else. It's great.

Sarah Rodriguez: That kind of leads to my next question. When did you come across regenerative agriculture? What did that term mean to you? Does it have any meaning to you in particular? What are the ways that you kind of incorporate some of those ideas into your work?

Amyrose Foll: It's funny because, like, there's always these buzzwords in agriculture. Sustainable agriculture, permaculture, regenerative agriculture, and it's really funny because there's, like, this big, I guess–could you say it's a political debate?

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Or discourse about indigenous agriculture being the original permaculture, but then it was just commodified and turned into online courses so that some random person on the computer can go through the motions, and then get a certificate that pops out of their printer anointing them the expert in permaculture or the expert in regenerative agriculture, which is kind of funny. Anyway, I use traditional indigenous farming methods. I guess it is regenerative, but I don't really call it, really, regenerative. Obviously, I cannot, like, herd wild animals through my farm, so we do controlled burns. Across the street–we've got a lot of different types of soil between this side of the road and the other side of the road. So, what I was doing was kind of just assessing what was going on. There's a little area over there that was clay that I am growing in now. Now, it's a seed trial area for the University of Vermont in [inaudible] for a culturally significant seed trial.

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But it was a lot of clay. So, what I did, I threw a ton of, like–I think I threw down clover, and turnips, and radishes, and something else. I think I threw, like, kale or something out there. I don't know, it was just, like, a bunch of seeds that I had floating around, just broadcast them over there, and then I let the pigs in there. Because the root vegetables will kind of disrupt the soil a little bit anyway, more surface. So, after I burnt, I covered it with seeds, let those grow out, put the pigs on that. They love rooting around, plus they'll eat grubs and things like that, worms. And there's a hickory tree there and some acorns that come out of there. And then, they get moved out, then that sets for a while because you want to make sure that you're not going to be inadvertently causing illness. We're not running a CAFO, so it's really not a huge risk of that.

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But you don't want–especially with chickens because they've got hot manure. Because I do use the birds, too. I use turkeys and pigs together because one kind of, like, eats the droppings–it's so gross, I'm sorry. But plus, they're going to eat a lot of the bugs and larva. The fire kills a lot of that sort of stuff. The pigs will root up and kind of till for me. So, then, that'll sit, we'll cover it again, and then I'll solarize it and then occult it, and then, just plant through that, or then take the tarp off and then mulch it intensively. Right now, that's got a tarp on it, and things are planted through the tarp. Because also, I hate weeding. I'm lazy. So, instead of, like, using the natural–what would be the traditional, like, animal disruption to improve soil, I kind of force my animals to do the–plus, then, they fertilize for me, too. And I'm cheap also as well as lazy. I don't like to weed, which is why I love to, like, cover and then plant through that.

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Don't have to pay for pesticides, don't have to pay for–because you're adding potash to the ground with the burning. I know, like, anybody listening, please make sure you're following your local ordinances and do not set fire–always have a fire boss, always have water. But yeah, you're adding potash with the fire, you're killing a lot of the eggs and larva. I know a lot of farmers here in Virginia that get furiously angry about the squash bore bugs, and stinkbugs, and whatnot messing up their squash by the time July rolls around. And I really don't have to fight with them as much as–we're almost to freeze, and you can see this tromboncino squash over there to your left, my right, still going strong. And I haven't sprayed any of that. That is just a little seed garden for the tomatoes that I have in the bucket right there and some random squash and corn that needs to be taken out of there and fed to the goats.

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But that way, nothing is wasted, the animals are adding manure to the ground, and I don't have to till. And then, I get the benefit of the beautiful mycorrhizal mat underneath the soil without disrupting that, so you're saving your carbon captured under there, and your plants benefit from that mycelium network. Except for your brassicas, but we don't need to get into that. But the plants benefit from that, your soil benefits from that. And then, the ultimate produce benefits from that with having a higher nutrient density, healthier plants, less pest pressure, and then the end consumer gets a high nutritionally dense food, and it's healthy. Because it's so important. And your soil impacts the quality of your produce and your health in so many different ways. Soil is the building block of any farming operation.

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Whether you're running a wood lot, a cattle operation, or a seed farm, everything depends on the soil. So, I use a lot of those traditional, like, burning is just a traditional indigenous farming method. And it's good to teach my kids that as well, and teach them how to do that safely and the benefits to the soil. And we do have a forest garden also, and I treat my forest garden and my wood lot like a garden. We thin out trees that are not desirable to open up the canopy a little bit, we strategically plant native fruit and nut trees in the dappled sunlight when we've opened up a big area of canopy in the wood lot area for fire donations. Because we do give away firewood to those in need as well. I was honestly shocked how many people have primary wood heat in Virginia. I guess these counties out here have quite a bit of that. And then, there's the rotary guys that have become our partners.

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They call themselves the wood chuckers. It's a bunch of retired men with pickup trucks that come, and they get their list from the Social Services Office and deliver firewood for us to those in need. But it's important just as much in my wood lot as it is over there in my tomato garden. And the quality of the produce that you're getting out of a good quality soil impacts–especially with children. And I guess this is the nurse in me that's coming out and why I'm so passionate about having good-quality food from a good healthy farming atmosphere or operation. I don't know how to articulate that. Even from the time you're an infant or toddler, the food that you put in your body is going to impact far reaching events, from cognitive development to educational outcomes, and health decades down the road. So, I think it's really imperative, as, I guess, farmers on the frontline of health–I'm not trying to spin a farmer into a healthcare worker, but when you think about it, food is medicine.

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That's the cliché. But it really does ring true, and it's one of the most simple things that you can do for your health is try to just slow down and incorporate a little bit more of those healthy things in your diet.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, that makes sense.

Amyrose Foll: I am talking way too long-winded. Oh, my gosh, this is going to be the longest interview ever.

Sarah Rodriguez: You are doing exactly what you need to do. Thank you.

Amyrose Foll: [Laugh] I'm so sorry, I get so passionate about this stuff.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's awesome. I'm curious, you talk about all these different methods and how you use indigenous methods primarily. Can you talk about the learning process when it comes to, like, how you learned that? Do you spread that knowledge around?

Amyrose Foll: Oh, yeah, definitely.

Sarah Rodriguez: How do you learn new things? What does that process look like?

Amyrose Foll: Oh, yeah, definitely. So, I am really lucky because I grew up in a family that did these things from–like, I was just around. And you're a sponge when you're a child.

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Like I said earlier, I took it for granted, so basically, it was just learning to appreciate what I was taught as a child and then implementing that into my life as an adult. I was really lucky. I do teach–I go all over the place. In a couple weeks, I'll be in Rapid City, South Dakota for the Lakota Liberation Summit, doing some workshops there with them. I'll be at VSU next week, doing indigenous cooking. But I'm going to be taking things like these ears of corn on the table in front of us to talk about how this and this diverged and all of that sort of stuff. I'm lucky that I grew up with that. A lot of people didn't. So, like, last Friday, we had the Women for the Land from the American Farmland Trust here. I did a Zoom for them a few weeks ago, but then they came and did a field day here Friday, and it was fantastic. They were here all day. And a couple of them are coming to pick up some goats from me next week.

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Because we also donate livestock. We help people get started. Virginia Free Farm also–we don't just give away food, we provide technical assistance, education, hands-on learning opportunities,

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we provide free seeds, free seedlings, chicks, ducks, turkeys, geese, baby goats for anyone that wants to get started either growing for mutual aid or for self-sufficiency that otherwise might not have the opportunity to because of financial accessibility issues. And we also help other organizations get started. There's an intensive inpatient rehab facility in the Richmond area, Chesterfield, called McShin Foundation, and we got them started with their McFarm by delivering chicks, and ducklings, and seeds, and plants for them to incorporate garden and livestock therapy into their folks that were going through drug treatment there.

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Which was the most beautiful thing. It was one of the most beautiful experiences of my life. One of the patients came out, and I had this box of ducks and chicks that were, like, just a few days old, and one of the guys that was there as a patient was a carpenter, I guess, and he had built this elaborate setup for them for a brooder, and this girl comes out, and she apparently grew up on a chicken farm in Iowa, and she goes, "You brought me a box of love." And it was the most–I don't know, just seeing the joy on her face, someone going through something really hard, and working really hard on themselves, and taking that brave step to go, and do that, and get help, like, just seeing the joy that, like, you're able to bring people through just something as simple as livestock or plants, it's the most beautiful thing ever. I love that. I get so happy. [Laugh] I have the best life ever.

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I'm so lucky. But yeah, I don't know. So, we teach people. I go all over, I do that. We have people come here. And then, I go to schools sometimes. Usually colleges. I'm not so great with teaching kids. It's not my strong suit. But I have done elementary schools here and there, usually

just around the counties and sometimes in Richmond. That's when you need to indoctrinate them, get your hooks in those kids, propaganda. [Laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: You mentioned some of the farmers around here that you are in community with. Is there sharing of knowledge with them?

Amyrose Foll: Oh, yeah, definitely. I learn something from them every time I talk to them. When the Women for the Land cohort was here last week, we gave away hundreds of packs of seeds from the Southern Exposure Seed Exchange just down the road. One of the female farmers that helped me with, like, the hog maturing does germination testing for them.

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But because they're certified organic, once she opens them, because her farm's not certified organic, they can't then be repacked. So, they don't want to throw them away, so I redistribute them. I'm going to take a ton of them. She's coming by next week on Wednesday and bringing more. I'm going to take a ton of them to Pine Ridge, South Dakota. There are some going to–shoot, I've got so much coming up on my schedule, I don't even know. There's some going down to Georgia. They go everywhere. And we actually mail them out all over the place from Essential Food and Medicine in Oakland, California to El Departamento de la Comida in Puerto Rico and everything in between. It's amazing. Yeah, she's actually sending a Puerto Rican farmer over here to deliver them on Wednesday because she's busy. It's crazy how many strands of the spider web have been developed in this thing and how much I've learned from them and vice versa. It's really great.

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It's wonderful. And especially sharing knowledge. There's too much gatekeeping and resource hoarding in a lot of fields. And some of the women that were here last week were talking about that. And I was like, "Oh, go to my website. Go to the community impact tab. Halfway down, there's a button that says knowledge is power, and it's basically my entire Ivy League degree in sustainable agriculture for free, all organized into folders." And other good sources that I find that I come across. I have this big folder in my email that just says educational resources because I want everyone to win. I love being able to share that sort of stuff. Because I had to join the Army to be able to afford money for college. Nobody should have to do that. And that's how my husband ended up in Iraq. I don't want somebody to have to make that hard choice to be able to afford to go to school or gain knowledge, so I just put it out there for free. Probably shouldn't be saying that I do that, but whatever. [Laugh]

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Yeah, I don't know. I love teaching people. Not so much the kids, but adults, yes. Love it. I took the women around here, I'm like, "Get the shears. Get a bucket. We're going to be taking clippings." And, gosh, we probably took 200 clippings from elderberries, and goji berries, and raspberries, everything else under the sun, walking around this property. It was great.

Sarah Rodriguez: Awesome. You mentioned a lot of different aspects of the work that you do. Could you talk about some of the challenges in that work, in doing that knowledge sharing, in farming, anything that feels resonant?

Amyrose Foll: [Laugh] Time. I need, like, a million of me and, like, I don't even know how many hours in the day or days in the week. We've got a barn over there, I'll show you later after we're done, that we're turning into a community food pantry and free store. And it's slow going. I don't

know what to do because, like, to get funding, there's only so much time to write grants, but then I have to do stuff.

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You know what I mean? There's always a shortage of that. And so, it's a really hard balance to strike between, "Oh, my gosh, is my time best spent fundraising right now, or is it best spent in the field?" Because we do have volunteers, but we always need more, and I am exhausted all the time. I love it, but I am exhausted. I'm lucky, I feel like that cheesy cliché of an old man that you can close your eyes and see going, "Do what you love, and you'll never work a day in your life." I have realized that in my life. I love what I do. But I'm so tired, and there's always so much to do. And I feel frantic because I want to share with everybody because I don't want this to stop. What if I get hit by a bus tomorrow, and I don't share knowledge, or what I'm doing, or processes?

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Then, it all goes away with me. So, sharing with other people, and not being guarded about the work that you're doing, and inviting other people is vital because otherwise, the work stops with you. That's really important to me. A lot of the seeds that we grow are traditional varieties that are extremely scarce. We grow regular food for donation as well, but I also grow specific seed gardens to rematriate back to the tribes. Some of them are extremely scarce. A lot of those communities do not even have easy access to their ancestral seeds a lot of times. We share seeds around, too, and make sure that everyone is connected so it doesn't end with us. Like, seeds tell the story of who you are, plus you become a part of that story as you're growing from season to season. I was being interviewed a few months ago for another university.

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I got choked up, and I almost started crying talking about my grandma. Chili peppers are a new-world crop, but they obviously went across the ocean very quickly, there's all these varieties. And when you think of, like, pepper rings on your sub sandwich, it's usually, like, Hungarian wax peppers or something like that that have been pickled. My grandmother brought these peppers with her when she came here to get away from Austria. She actually was born in Budapest, Hungary, and my grandfather was born in Prague, but they were living in Austria. That was all, like, one big amalgamated area. The culture is kind of fluid, and the map has changed so much. Now, it's Germany. We've known Germany, Czech Republic, whatever, but Europe used to change a lot. So, she brought these peppers. I still grow her peppers. She died in 1999. My children have never met her, but she still lives in my garden and feeds them.

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That's beautiful. And my uncle didn't even know that I had those peppers and was growing them. I was with him last July because I had to teach at the Mother Earth News conference, and it happened to be in the town that he lived in. I took him and my aunt out to dinner. And I mailed him some of his mother's pepper seeds that he didn't even know were still in circulation. The big stinky bucket sitting next to you is from an Italian family that brought those seeds over. I'm going to move that away from you really quick because they stink. I picked these. These came from the Spoon River Valley in the late 40s. Her grandfather that was in Mussolini's army came here, brought those tomatoes here from the Spoon River Valley of Italy, and their family's been growing them out for decades. She came to visit along with her mother, and they brought me these seeds. They call them Tata's cuore, grandpa's heart. Her grandfather died, I want to say, in the early 80s, but now he lives in my garden, too.

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It's kind of beautiful. And her grandmother was like my second grandmother. And she was also the fiercest, tiniest, most intimidating woman I've ever seen in my life. [Laugh] I don't have a drop of Italian blood in my body, but I had a nona. [Laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: Love that.

Amyrose Foll: I do. I love it. And she was just an amazing woman as well. So, it's really great that, like, I'm able to be a little piece of that story because tomatoes are also a new-world crop. And it's amazing how fast they changed the global food scene to what we have today. I love food. I love talking about food, I love eating food. [Laugh] I love sharing food, I love growing food. I don't even know. I'm hopeless. [Laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you talk a bit about, especially not being originally from the South when you were growing up, what do you think is the kind of uniqueness about farming here in the South and in Virginia?

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Amyrose Foll: Oh, man, southern food is–it's amazing. Also, I had–I don't even know, baptism by fire going out to eat in Richmond. Y'all, what is going on with pimento cheese? It is a science, an art, some people probably consider it an aphrodisiac, and it's probably been the source of bar fights. I didn't even know what pimento cheese was here, and I didn't know, like, what was going on with the peppers grown to put in that. I didn't even know it was a thing. People get very serious about their food here in Virginia. People are very serious about their collard greens. People are very serious about their grits in the South and their barbecue, that was another thing. So, I raise hogs. And I love pigs. Pigs are the best. I love the way they taste.

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They are so cute, and they're wonderful animals to raise. But raising hogs for slaughter in Virginia is great. We've got lots of oak trees here in this area where I'm at, and the pigs love them, of course. And they're delicious. It's delicious meat, having acorn-finished pigs. And Virginia's weather is just so easy to grow in compared to where I came from. I love having a longer growing season. I'm a little scared about climate change bumping us up a zone. That makes me nervous. But I love doing the pigs here, and people take their barbecue seriously, too, here. And being able to raise hogs for donation for ground pork, or hams, and all that sort of stuff, sausages–because we make that all here on farm. It's donation. There's, like, the good Samaritan type law for donations for food items in Virginia, thankfully.

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I originally went to school actually for microbiology before going back to school for nursing, so I'm very anal retentive about making sure everything is healthy and clean, but I love being able to grow out in this environment and then be able to provide good, quality, healthy, clean foods for people. And Virginia's just the best place to do it. The South is so wonderful. And the people here are so loving and welcoming. I did get teased for saying pop, and I actually was teased greatly because I did not know that barbecue was a food item. I thought it was an activity you did like hamburgers and hotdogs on the grill. That's what we called a barbecue growing up up north. I had no idea the depth and breadth of pulled pork, and brisket, and all of these things. Oh, my gosh. And now, I get invited to this boucherie down in Georgia every year. I love to go.

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It's one of the best things, best experiences of the year. And all the amazing foods that are shared with people sharing southern food-raising culture from, like, the Acadians. And I learned that there's German Acadians, and French Acadians, and there's Cajun people that go, and we had, like, a fancy chef from Peru. All of the melding of cultures that happen in the South. And the Gulf Coast is the most fascinating part of the American food scene, I think. But I'm up here in lowly Virginia that some of y'all probably don't even consider the South. But to me, this is the South, and it's, like, the best because we get a little bit of snow, but then it's just beautiful the rest of the time, and I get to have a longer growing season than being up north.

Sarah Rodriguez: Do you think that some of the farming practices, especially that you've kind of incorporated into your work, especially when you talk about the indigenous routes of them, do you think those have a distinct southern identity or regional identity?

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Amyrose Foll: So, indigenous farming practices are very different from culture to culture because this is a huge landmass, and while there are a lot of similarities, to lump it all together would be as silly as saying that, like, the farming culture in Sweden and the farming culture in Italy are the same because they're on the same landmass. Totally different people, totally different food culture, practices, all that sort of stuff. Take, for example, Three Sisters. Everyone knows the Three Sisters. I'm so sick of people asking me, "Do you grow Three Sisters?" First of all, my tribe has seven sisters, not three sisters. Plus, there's different methods of Three Sisters. Generally, when people think of that, they think of mounds, which I think is pretty characteristic of a lot of things on the East Coast. [inaudible] I'm pretty sure mounds. But there's different methods. There's landscape method, there's field method for Three Sisters that you'll find as you march west, not so much the mounds of corn, beans, and squash.

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But yeah, it's so different across the continent from culture to culture. Because, like, look at where I'm from. My family is from a very cold place. Our corn is tiny, smaller than these little guys right here, compared to something like this pima white corn from down southwest. Totally different. And then, you've got this strawberry corn that's native to Virginia, to this area, from the Monacan nation, actually, and this is a cousin of it, Quapaw red, that went west. So, totally different methods of farming, just like totally different methods of food preparation. We all had corn culture for the most part. Not all, but generally speaking. But even just prepping corn with nixtamalization, you go down into Mexico, and they've got cal.

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You go into this area, hardwood ash. Or you go up north farther, you've got ash from corn stovers and spring salt for flavoring your food, from burning those stalks, and then using those ashes to nixtamalize the corn or fertilize fields. So, it's so different. I don't even know how to really describe it. There's a lot of people implementing those things here in Virginia, and it's amazing because it's women and young women. We had so many female farmers here last Friday, it was life-giving. I feel like we are hospicing the old of what you think of, when you think of a farmer, like, an older man in overalls. And now, it is multigenerational women, a lot of young women, and from a variety of different demographics, backgrounds. It's amazing. I absolutely love it. I love it so much. And there's a lot of Black female farmers, and I'm like, "Hell yes, this is amazing."

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Because Virginia stuck out, especially Charlottesville, into, I believe, the 30s or 40s as having a lot more Black farms that held on longer because of the really atrocious policies or practices that were carried out, basically stealing farmland from these people. And I'm loving seeing it come back and seeing so many women hospice the old and midwife in the new generation of farmers. It's kind of beautiful.

Sarah Rodriguez: I love that.

Amyrose Foll: Yes. The future is female. [Laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: You already started going into it, but can you describe what we've got here in front of us?

Amyrose Foll: Oh, yeah. Okay, so I love props. So, this is a bean, this is an Abenaki cranberry bean from maritime Canada, the source of much debate in New England and maritime Canada about whose beans are whose, and what's a true cranberry bean? Because there's different kinds of cranberry beans, and some are Mohawk, and some are Abenaki or Wabanaki.

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This is tutelo beans. These are from here. You get to hear my beans pouring into the–all beans, green beans, are native to North America. What would our Thanksgiving tables be without sweet potato, and squash, and turkeys, and beans? And mashed potatoes. Potatoes are a new-world crop. It's amazing how we really don't get credit for the food culture that we have contributed. Grits are not hipster–shrimp and grits, they are not hipster cafe culture. It is a testament to the culinary prowess of the great Houma nation because grits would not have–corn products, corn bread, corn grits, they would not be without millennia of indigenous agricultural genius behind them and the processing of it. But now, it's, like, brunch. Sunday brunch, fancy. Like, shrimp and

grits. I'm going to put on my beanie, and my mustache, and my flannel shirt and go have a beer at the brewery in Richmond. [Laugh]

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That was really super trendy for a while at cafes, but it is indigenous food. Look at the Gulf Coast, shrimp, grits, corn bread, all of that. These beans are totally different phenotypically, but they all stem from a common ancestor that have been adapted by generations of genius female farmers. Because traditionally, in a lot of native–not all, but most native cultures, the females were the farmers, and they held down the fort, so to speak, not literally, but held down the house, and farmed, and made sure everyone got fed. And then, like, we know that corn came from one common ancestor, teosinte, but look at the difference in form of this concho corn, to this strawberry corn, to this red corn, and this flint corn from the Southwest.

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They're so different. Like, humans are so genius, and a lot of things were developed–like, this is developed, it matures, this pima white. It matures in 60 days without being irrigated. Little, short, squat, tiny, little things about the height of those little guys, and they reliably put out two to three good–this is a good sized ear–on each one of those tiny, little plants without irrigation in 60 days. 90 days if you plant it if it's raining a lot, which is kind of counterintuitive. Or, like, this will mature in a very short season, as will this. Some of them are longer seasons, and humans adapted them brilliantly to do what they needed to do. Who's to say that the genetics from these short-season corns that don't need to be watered aren't going to save us from ourselves as we're, like, sleepwalking towards climate disaster? It's really interesting.

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And I love–some of these varieties that I grow, you cannot buy commercially, even from small boutique seed stores. And my first order of business usually, especially if it is not readily accessible to the tribes, is to make sure that their citizens have access to it from me. Grow it out, make sure that we have seed stock in the freezer for backup just in case, and then encourage them to grow and learn. I was appalled this spring, I was getting ready to do a guest lecture at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, and I'd been talking to a couple citizens from the Monacan nation, and they had found some people that were not Monacan that were making jewelry out of their tutelo corn, and one of the elders that I was on the phone with had such precious little stock of that corn that they had never tasted their own ancestral corn. I got off the phone with her, and I heard that same story about, like, witnessing people making jewelry in that area where they lived out of the corn when they didn't even have enough access to use it.

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And I started making calls, and I found a seed breeder about 10, 15 minutes away from me who's one of the most brilliant seed breeders I've ever met from Commonwealth Seeds. And I didn't even have to ask him, I just told him what's going on, and he was like, "Yep, I'll do some germ testing, and I'll be over at your house in a couple days with it." He even wrote his contact information on the big, huge bucket of seeds for them. And since I was going to see them the next day, I was able to return that to them, so they got their seeds back. And I didn't even have to ask him to do the right thing, he just offered it up. He was just as appalled as I am. And he's a white seed breeder. He has, like, no dog in that fight. You know what I mean? He's just a good person and an incredibly skilled gardener. I admire him so much.

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Commonwealth Seed Growers puts out really great seeds. I’m not paid by them. I sound like I’m putting out a commercial for them, but they are wonderful. And, I don't know, I just feel like it's really important that, especially with the obscure varieties, preserving that biodiversity, preserving that cultural legacy, making right the wrongs of these foods being taken away from these people in the example of those seeds not being accessible to that community–and yes, I'm native, but I’m not from Virginia, I’m a guest on their land, too. So, I always put that first in my mind, making sure that what I’m doing is going to benefit them, the first people of Virginia, and then everyone else because we're all guests here. And I’m trying to be a good guest, I guess you could say. [Laugh] But also, if we don't save these very obscure varieties–like, this Quapaw red, a few years ago when I started growing it, you couldn't even find any image results returned back on Google and everything, so Google.

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And I found one scholarly article from the University of Kentucky from, like, 2014 or something like that. Started growing it out en masse at a very limited quantity that I started with because it was, at the time, extremely hard to find, and I sent a ton of it back to the Quapaw nation, and now they give it away on–somebody's growing it there, and I saw that they're giving their corn away at their Quapaw farmer's market on Saturdays, which is amazing. [Laugh] I was just Googling to see what's going on with it because it's been growing. And, like, you're kind of saving it for the future generations to enjoy and to be able to know these plants. Because if we don't grow it because it doesn't fit into the highly mechanized, vertically integrated Big Ag, that biodiversity and this really cool cultivar could be lost to time.

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And I feel like there's value in saving that and saving that for kids. Like, I want all the little kids at the elementary school to be able to see this and go, "Ooh," and, "Ahh," and know that, yes, you can eat all these different types of corn. Corn is not ornamental just because people don't know how to prepare it. That's where they went wrong. They took our corn, but they didn't listen to us with how to prepare it. And pellagra, enriched grains. [Laugh] Yeah, because the way that you prepare it is important. But they're so beautiful, and they have so many different uses. And look at tortillas. Who doesn't love a good tortilla? I probably eat more than my fair share. But all these different corns make amazing masas, or corn balls, or a million different things. I love hominy. I love corn. I am corny. Ha-ha. That was a bad joke.

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But yeah, I just want future generations to know this, too. Everyone deserves to have these things at their fingertips or to know these things. I go into elementary schools every once in a while, and I was shocked that a kid did not know what a radish was. I had a teacher, I think it was a third grade teacher, and I will not name the school, say, "What do we need farms for? We have the grocery store." She had to be about 35 years old. She's a little bit younger than me. But still, what in the world has this country come to? I think people forget that things start somewhere before they end up on the Styrofoam tray on the grocery store shelf. And you go from Maine to Arizona, you get the same varieties of things across the country, but there's so much more, and there's so many stories to tell through those foods. I want everyone to know these things. That's why I love giving away seeds, too, and encouraging people to grow, even if they start with something really simple, like squash, or corn, or something like that.

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And save seeds. Then, you become part of that story that's 10,000 years plus in the making. Your fingerprints are on those seeds that you select and save for the next season and then the next season after that, and then you never know where those seeds are going to end up. It's kind of beautiful, in a way.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure. As we're wrapping up, is there anything I didn't ask about that you want to share? Any stories that you want to share that I didn't ask about?

Amyrose Foll: Oh, gosh. I feel bad because I've talked your ear off like a crazy person because I get really excited about these things. Yeah, I just encourage everyone, whether you're an eater, or aspiring gardener, or agricurious, or whatever, to start–plant one thing, and save seeds from it. It's really satisfying. One of the most important things I feel like I've ever done, the boucherie I talked about in Georgia, Jon Jackson is down in Georgia in Milledgeville.

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He's also another Army vet. [Laugh] But I go down there and see him in January for boucherie. He puts on an amazing event. So much good food. So, we trade seeds. I took him a native seed bundle, and he gave me some motherland okra that he had brought back from Africa before it was available because he's been growing out and contracting, I think with Baker Creek. Sapelo Island peas from the Gullah people down there, Barrier Islands. I did not know at the time, but the seed came from Cornelia Bailey originally. I've been growing it out here. It grows prolifically in Virginia, and it's a wonderful southern pea. And it holds up really well if you're cooking them, and then you want to make, like, beans and rice, mixing it in, they don't get mushy if you accidentally overcook them. They hold their shape really well, and they're flavorful. And they're even great young as a snap bean, even though it's not really a bean.

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I don't know, I'll eat anything raw out of the garden. But I was doing a workshop at the Carolina Farm Stewards last year in North Carolina, and a gentleman from Senegal, who I now communicate with through email, is doing community garden projects in Dakar or out in that area in Senegal, and I usually try to do hands-on stuff. I will bring envelopes and seeds, bins of seeds, pods for people to dig through. I'll do my presentation while we're doing the hands-on activity so that people also can have something–they can have hands-on experience and have something tangible to take home that's satisfying and really think about what they're doing or what I'm saying, instead of just listening to me drone on. So, I gave him a ton of these seeds, and he's like, "Will these grow in West Africa?" And I gave him more than I gave everyone else, and I'm like, "Take them in your carry-on, throw some granola on top of them so you don't get caught in customs.

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Say they're your snack. They're not going to go through your granola." And I got a little emotional about this. I'm like, "These belong to you. These came from your many, many great grandmothers past that, in the worst moments of their lives, gathered up and brought here for hope for the future. They will grow there. They will remember the soil they came from." And now, we're pen pals [Laugh] via email. And I've been able to connect him with some people in Ghana that I have coordinated with that have come here to Virginia to tour some of my community gardens and travel gardens and talk about how we can solve food insecurity or land access problems over there. But yeah, it was beautiful being able to give them back to him. And that wasn't even on my horizon, but I was so humbled to be able to return them to him.

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It was one of the best moments of my life. And if I wasn't saving seeds, that would've never happened. Plus, I'm a little bit of a hoarder. [Laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: Not a bad thing.

Amyrose Foll: I want all the plants.

Sarah Rodriguez: Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

Amyrose Foll: Thank you.

[End]

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