



Anita & Thomas Roberson

Botanical Bites and Provisions - Fredericksburg, Virginia

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Community in Virginia

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Sarah Rodriguez: This is Sarah Rodriguez with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is November 6, 2024. I'm here in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Do you mind introducing yourself for the recorder?

Anita Roberson: Sure. My name's Anita Roberson, I'm a farmer, and my farm is Botanical Bites and Provisions.

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

Anita Roberson: I was born in '57 and Paris, France.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. And did you end up growing up there? What was your childhood growing up like?

Anita Roberson: My father was a military Air Force NCO, and he was assigned in Paris. And of course, my mother had to go into labor. And apparently, at that time, there wasn't a military hospital available, so I was born in a French hospital. I'm a naturalized citizen. And don't really have any remembrance of being in Paris, but just enjoy the pictures that we had when we were there.

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

Anita Roberson: My parents and my siblings. I had one brother and two sisters.

Sarah Rodriguez: Where are you in the lineup?

Anita Roberson: I am the middle child. I kind of followed in my father's footsteps. My brother didn't want to have anything to do with the military. Of course, my father was kind of disappointed. I did go in the military, in the Army. Of course, he said that I wasn't Army material. And I'm one of those stubborn children, I had to prove him wrong, and went in the Army anyway, and had a very successful career.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me what food was like in your household growing up or what you learned about food from your family?

Anita Roberson: Well, food was kind of interesting. My grandfather was from Spotsylvania County. My father grew up on a farm, and he would save up his annual leave, 30 days or more every year, and we would come back to Spotsylvania County to my grandfather's farm and help him out every year.

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So, that's where my appreciation for farming came from because it seemed to be a magical place. My grandfather was a dairy farmer. Of course, back then, they were real homesteaders. They grew everything and raised all the meats that they ate, did all the processing themselves. My grandmother was a phenomenal cook, and she had a beautiful flower grade, and that's kind of what lured me into doing cut flowers. And so, I always felt like if I had a farm, I could be self-sufficient, I could pretty much clothe myself if I had sheep or whatever, fiber, and just have a really happy life, not depending on other people, just doing things myself and making sure the things that I ate were healthy.

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Now, I think all the processing of the food has led to so many disease processes. The diabetes is out of control, I know in my family. And even though I subscribe to a healthier lifestyle, it's still something that I think has altered the genetics within us that we're passing down through the generations. So, that's where my heart lies with the farming.

Sarah Rodriguez: What were some of the meals that were made from these goods at the farm?

Anita Roberson: Oh, my grandmother would do all of her breads from scratch. She'd get up probably, like, 4 o'clock in the morning. Back then, she had a wood stove, so she didn't have all these fancy electrical conveniences. All the whipping of whatever she was making was done by hand. There was no– what do you call it? The fancy mixer. KitchenAid like we have now.

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[Laugh] And she was just fit, she would go out, I'd go out with her, and she would get the eggs, and the bacon would be in the smoke house, and she would carefully plan all the meals. Like, the beans and those kinds of things, a lot of times, she had shelled and preserved, either canned them or dried them and had them on the shelf. So, you could see where all the food came from. You didn't see all these chemicals that you can't pronounce added to the food products. And everything just tasted delicious.

Sarah Rodriguez: This is your grandmother on your father's side.

Anita Roberson: My father's side. Mm-hmm.

Sarah Rodriguez: And their family's from Virginia?

Anita Roberson: From Virginia. Mm-hmm.

Sarah Rodriguez: And where's your mother's family from?

Anita Roberson: They're also from Virginia, but they're from Louisa County.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Did you know when you were younger what you wanted to do when you were growing up?

Anita Roberson: I thought I wanted to be an airline stewardess because my dad was in the Air Force, and he was always flying to all these unique places. And I wanted to see Hawaii because he would always be going back and forth to Hawaii. But later on, when I realized the stewardess didn't make that much money, and it was kind of like a glorified– like you're in McDonald's, a serving position, I said, "No, I don't think I can sustain myself doing this."
[Laugh] And so, I studied undergraduate biology and fell in love with my botany class because we were planting seeds and learning the whole process. But at the time, I was thinking I wanted to go into medicine, and ended up in hospital administration. So, that's where I started my career.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Where did you go for university?

Anita Roberson: Virginia Union University. And then later, in the military, I went to Troy State in Alabama and did a master's program in management.

Sarah Rodriguez: So, you went into hospital administration afterwards, you said that was just a first stop though.

Anita Roberson: That was my first stop. And I did some of that in the military, and then I met this young man, and we got married, and had a son, and decided, "Maybe it's not such a

good idea for both of us to be in the military," because it was so traumatic for our son for both of us to be gone for long periods of time, especially with deployments. And then, he went to Iraq and was gone for a considerable amount of time, and I was kind of on the list to go, too. So, I decided at the time that, "Maybe at the end of this stint, I'll go on and get out," and that's what I did and transitioned to the Federal Service.

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And ended up in Washington D.C. working for a political appointee and finished out my career there. So, I did more human resources management.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me a bit then how you decided to get into farming? Were you planting? You said you had an interest pretty early on in planting.

Anita Roberson: I did. My father– this house, what we call our farm house, belonged to my aunt, who is my father's sister. And it's 10 acres, and every year, my uncle and my father would plant this huge garden. And it was like, free vegetables for everybody. So, I really enjoyed what they did, and they really helped out the community because Fredericksburg, at that time, wasn't this suburb of Washington D.C.

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And a lot of times, people didn't have the wherewithal to buy healthy vegetables. So, we got into it kind of the same way because when we first started out, the economy was really bad, and people were having a hard time, so we would allow people to just come here and kind of pick whatever they wanted because we were growing– how many seeds do you need to plant tomatoes? Just one tomato will probably produce, like, 50 rows of tomato plants. [Laugh] So, we kind of did that and made a difference in the community, and we donated a lot to the food banks.

And then, we went to Virginia State's Small Farm Outreach program. They came to our church because our church is located near Lake Anna. I don't know if you're familiar with that area. And it's very rural, and most people have large tracts of land.

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And we still have my grandfather's property. And of course, it's grown up, so we manage it as a small forest. And they were saying, "Why don't you think about agriculture?" And so, they said, "We do all this training. The training is free." And so, I would save my leave and start attending classes. And the more classes I attended, the more intrigued I became about this whole farming operation. I told them, I said, "You're almost ready to retire, I'm almost ready to retire. Wouldn't it be neat for us to farm? We're not that far from the city, we're in between Washington D.C. and Richmond. I think we could make a go of this thing." And so, I would take marketing classes, I learned how to build a website, and I thought I had it going on. So, I– you did the application, didn't you, Rob?

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Thomas Roberson: Mm-hmm.

Anita Roberson: To create an LLC and start taking some classes at the Small Business Administration. And one thing led to another, applied to be able to accept SNAP subsidies, and it just kind of rolled on from there. And then, Virginia State has Small Farm agents that will come and help you on your farm. So, the first year, we did pretty well.

Thomas Roberson: Mm-hmm.

Anita Roberson: And then, Fredericksburg has a food co-op, and they were looking for farmers to provide fresh vegetables. So, we went to one of their meetings, and we joined the co-op. And so, that was an outlet for us to market some of our vegetables. And then, a store in Richmond had opened up that was looking to feed the community that was located in a food desert.

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So, they reached out to us, and we said that we would supply vegetables, but we kind of got tired of driving back and forth to Richmond because that's so time-absorbing, and you've got to harvest your vegetables. And at the time, we didn't have refrigeration, so we'd end up getting up, like, 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning because it's so hot in the summertime, trying to pack everything, weigh everything, and tag it, and all that kind of stuff. But started applying for some grants and ended up getting a grant from American Farmland Trust to get refrigeration for the farm. So, that was probably the thing that really opened doors for us because then, we didn't have to get up so early to go harvest everything and weigh everything. Because it was just kind of like, "I don't know about this farming thing. [Laugh] It's a lot of work."

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But I think the training aspect, there are so many free classes that are available. I think the challenge for me was, I had so many interests, to slow myself down, focus on one area of production before I add the next one. The second year, one of the program assistants at Virginia State said, "Hey, you're on a busy road. Why don't you add cut flowers to your enterprise?" And I was like, "Oh, gosh, something else for us to add." And he said, "No, no, let me tell you. When you go into Giant in their flower department, and you buy an arrangement, how much are you

paying for the flower? Think about it. Just one arrangement can be anywhere from \$35 to \$40. How many tomatoes do you have to put together to get \$35 or \$40?"

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And then, the lightbulb went on. I was like, "Okay." He wrote a grant, and he said, "If you will allow me to show you how to do this on your farm, Virginia State will pay for all your flower starts, show you how to plant them, and then if you host for other farmers in the area a workshop on how you did this, this will be your project.

Thomas Roberson: And they also paid for the irrigation system.

Anita Roberson: Oh, yes, that was the other thing.

Thomas Roberson: Which is very important.

Anita Roberson: And showed us how to do the irrigation system. And so, that year, we had the most beautiful flowers. People would stop and say, "Can we come and take pictures of your flowers?" Oh, gosh, we were just over the moon. So, with the flowers and the vegetables, this became sort of, like, a destination place, and people were coming, like, almost every weekend for either vegetables, flowers, or both.

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And I even had, like, a subscription service that if they bought a vase, if they brought their vase back, then I would discount their flowers because I didn't have to do all the wrapping and all that kind of stuff for the flowers. So, it was really successful.

Sarah Rodriguez: When did you relocate to Fredericksburg?

Anita Roberson: We came to Fredericksburg from Germany in '92.

Sarah Rodriguez: And did you come here? Where were you living when you first moved to Fredericksburg?

Anita Roberson: When I first came back to Fredericksburg, my parents were both alive, so we stayed with them for, what was it, two years? Pretty much. [phone rings]

Thomas Roberson: I had to stay at Fort Belvoir at the time.

Anita Roberson: Yeah, because he was at Fort Belvoir.

Thomas Roberson: I was in the emergency room at Fort Belvoir, so I had to have a place up there.

Anita Roberson: Yeah, because he had to be able to be there in the hospital if he got called within a half an hour.

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Sarah Rodriguez: And then, when did you kind of take over your family's land? That happened slowly over time?

Anita Roberson: It happened slowly after– my uncle ended up passing away. And my aunt, there's another house that's over on the other side, the five acres. The lot is five acres divided. And so, she says, "This is just too much for me to handle, the grass cutting, and the maintenance, and all that." And she says, "I'll sell you the house with the five acres, and I'll give you a really good deal." And I said, "Are you sure?" Because I was concerned about all my first cousins and my brothers and sisters. "Did you ask them, too?" And she said, "Yeah, they don't want it." And I said, "Well, how much do you want for it?" And she said, "\$10,000." I'm like, "I'll write you a check right now." [Laugh]

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And that's how we got the place. And then, my aunt lived until she was almost 100, and she was in this house. And she said, "This is too much for me, trying to cut grass and whatnot." She says, "I'll sell you this one. I can't make you the same deal, but if you want it, it's yours." And she had asked all my first cousins and my brothers and sisters, and they still didn't want it. And so, we came up with a reasonable offer, and that's how this became ours.

Sarah Rodriguez: And what year was that around?

Anita Roberson: This was– what would you say? It was, like, '94?

Thomas Roberson: No, that was before we went to Europe.

Anita Roberson: This house?

Thomas Roberson: This house was before we went to Europe. Yeah, and actually, because we just doubled down on it, by the time we got back–

Anita Roberson: Back from Europe, we had paid for it.

Thomas Roberson: –it was almost paid for, yeah.

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Anita Roberson: So, I guess that was, what, '91 or so?

Thomas Roberson: '89.

Anita Roberson: '89? Okay.

Thomas Roberson: Yeah.

Anita Roberson: But we allowed her to continue living in the house because she really gave us a good deal on the whole thing. And after she passed, we started renovating.

Thomas Roberson: And we're still renovating.

Anita Roberson: [Laugh] We're still renovating because there's always something you want to do.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me around what time you started slowly getting into farming through those classes and then what year you did full-time?

Anita Roberson: We actually started full-time in 2013. And so, it was a learning and growing experience. It wasn't something that just kind of happened overnight. We actually ran out of water the first year because we didn't understand water management.

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He had gone to a lecture, and it was all about irrigation management, and the guy said that, "If you don't have irrigation lines, you need to leave the class." [Laugh] And that was the year you ran the well dry, wasn't it?

Thomas Roberson: No, I ran that well dry before– yeah, it was around that timeframe, yeah. But that was one of the older bored wells. It wasn't a deep well. It was one of the ones that someone actually dug out. And it wasn't but about 30 feet down.

Anita Roberson: Because he had a hose, we're trying to water the vegetables.

Thomas Roberson: Yeah, so it was not intended to irrigate a farm. It was more, like, for a small home. Yeah.

Anita Roberson: Mm-hmm. Like, one or two people.

Thomas Roberson: Yeah, yeah. So, I went out there willy-nilly with that long water hose.

[Laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: Just spraying water, whatever.

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Thomas Roberson: Exactly.

Anita Roberson: So, that's what we learned. Digging wells is expensive, but we learned a good lesson and were able to share our experiences with other farmers. Because later, after we continued, and I guess the director for the Small Farm Outreach program kept seeing me show up, he asked us to sit on the advisory board.

Thomas Roberson: And we networked a lot with other farmers, which saved us a lot of money and time because we were getting ready to make mistakes that others had already made. And by networking, they were able to talk to us and show us the pitfalls. And it just helped us avoid a lot of mistakes. So, networking turned into a really good thing. And we really didn't feel like we were competing with other farmers, we felt like we were just all in the same boat, so to speak.

Anita Roberson: Right. and I think that's the unique thing about the farming community.

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For the most part, people are very sharing and open and want to help and assist. I also work with a group out of North Carolina, RAFI-USA, if you're familiar with them, and provide technical assistance to farmers in Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia. We try to be a lifeline so that people that are just getting into farming don't feel like, "I'm in this all by myself. Can I call her? I've got

this question, what would you do? Or do you have any resources?" So, it makes it a whole lot easier.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me when you came across the idea of regenerative agriculture? Do you have any connection to that word specifically?

Anita Roberson: Yes. I feel like I've always been connected to it because that's the way my family has farmed through generations.

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They made their own compost. The chicken manure was put in a pile, and seasoned, and then applied to the garden. Same thing with the cow manure. Everything was recycled. And I think if we call ourselves good stewards and we draw from our faith, and in my instance, Christian faith, we're called to be stewards of the resources. And it doesn't matter whether it's money, whether it's seeds, if we're going to protect our Earth, we have to treat it well. And we're already seeing this. Who ever thought that in November, we'd be walking around– I'm sweating. [Laugh] And when I was a child, I was probably playing in snow in November. So, this climate change is real. And if we don't start loving the Earth the way we should, she's not going to love us back.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me about some of the practices that you've put into place on your farm that are regenerative and how you learned of those?

Anita Roberson: Sure. One of the things that I've done is, I do vermicomposting. I have the red wigglers, and instead of throwing away our vegetables that are damaged or the groundhogs have eaten, I'll share that with the worms and allow them to break those things down. And it

makes some of the best fertilizer ever. The vermicompost will not burn the vegetables. The pH is always perfect. The worm poo is God's creation. Same thing with the leaves. I'm not going to bag up my leaves, I'm going to bunch them up, and I'm going to apply them to my garden.

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Because that's the way God makes fertilizer in the forest. Why should I buy something that's already readily available?

Thomas Roberson: And a lot of our neighbors where we live, they rake up all their leaves, and put them in the bags, and put them out on the step for the garbage. And we just roll down and get their bags. And we bring them down here. But we usually keep them for a year because we don't know what pesticides or anything that they've used on them, so we like to just let it set for a year and then take it out.

Anita Roberson: Mm-hmm. Our farm is certified naturally grown, so we don't apply any herbicides, pesticides–

Thomas Roberson: Or fungicides.

Anita Roberson: –or fungicides to any of our products.

Thomas Roberson: But we do have groundhogs, so we do occasionally have to use a homicide. [Laugh]

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Anita Roberson: [Laugh] We also put up 3D fences, electric fences for the deer. Our house, we applied solar panels to, so we don't have the electric bill. Everything's coming from God, the sun, to power everything in this house. And this house is all electric. Same thing as our house

that we live in. We have solar panels on that as well. The other thing that I am really big on is Goodwill. Table cloth, this furniture, most of the furniture in this place came from a secondhand store.

Thomas Roberson: Habitat for Humanity.

Anita Roberson: Habitat for Humanity. Because we believe in protecting humanity. I save seeds. I think I have my marigold seeds here that I harvested. So, in the spring, when I get ready to plant my marigolds– and of course, this has been recycled because this was a yogurt container.

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We also are beekeepers. This is some of the honey from our farm. And so, everything we do, we try to think about, "How can we recycle it?" Even my farm clothes I get from Goodwill. Why should I go and buy perfectly brand-new stuff when I'm going to get it dirty?

Thomas Roberson: And what we don't sell, we try to keep and use the seeds for following years. I can show you a jar of seeds.

Anita Roberson: Okra. Mm-hmm.

Thomas Roberson: We like to keep them in jars, not plastic, but glass jars, and keep them in the refrigerator, and it increases the germination rate. It really helps us. We had over 90% germination rate each year, just simply keeping them in the refrigerator. And they're fooled into thinking it's winter. And then, when we put the seeds out, they really perform for us.

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Anita Roberson: They're ready to sprout. Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me about the role of community in learning these practices? You said that some of this comes from what your parents or grandparents did. Is there also a learning aspect happening that way?

Anita Roberson: Yeah, I think to me, it's– how would you say it? I guess it's cultural, just doing the things that have been passed down from the generations. I think there's comfort in knowing that this was a successful practice 100 years ago for your great grandfather, and you're still practicing it now, so why does it need to be changed? We're also enrolled in Climate-Smart practices with the Rodale Institute, and we're experimenting with cover crops right now that we're going to apply no-till to.

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And instead of coming with– what do you call that thing?

Thomas Roberson: My rototiller?

Anita Roberson: Not the rototiller, the thing that cuts everything. The groundhog. Yeah, taking the groundhog and...

Thomas Roberson: That's the Scag you're talking about. Or the...

Anita Roberson: No, in the fields, you use the groundhog, right?

Thomas Roberson: The Bush Hog.

Anita Roberson: Bush Hog. I'm sorry. Bush Hog. [Laugh] He's the equipment person. To terminate the cover crops, we're going to do the roller crimping this year and just kind of look at the productivity from terminating them with the no-till as opposed to disturbing the microbiome through using the Bush Hog.

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Thomas Roberson: And everything we've done over the last 10 or 12 years, it's been a development or a growth. And a lot of the classes that we've attended with Virginia State University or Virginia Tech–

Anita Roberson: Virginia Tech, because we were there last week.

Thomas Roberson: –they both are involved with us, and they help us out. The classes have been tremendous, so they've really helped us increase productivity. Because it's good to have something, but it's better to have more of the same thing. And we've learned about companion planting, where you plant two different things, but they get along so well together, and they're not fighting each other. Putting marigolds with tomatoes because insects hate marigolds. So, we're learning more and more each time. And the classes have really been instrumental for us and helped us out. And we've learned so much about soil health. Not only soil health, about setting up irrigation systems because water is a very valuable resource.

Anita Roberson: A precious resource.

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Thomas Roberson: And there are a lot of places right now water is short and not really good. So, we try to be good stewards of our water and not just walk out there like Terrible Tom did 10 years ago and sprinkling all over the place. Now, we just try and do direct dripping systems.

Anita Roberson: Drip irrigation. Mm-hmm.

Thomas Roberson: So, it works better for us.

Anita Roberson: And I think the other thing, to add onto what you were saying, is working with the Earth and working with nature instead of against nature. And I think that's what regenerative agriculture is all about.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me a bit about how you get– you mentioned a little bit how you get your produce out into the community. You mentioned the local co-op. Do you host at farmer's markets? Do you host here?

Anita Roberson: We had done at farmer's markets. But since we're older farmers, getting up early, driving the stuff, and lifting it– we know our limitations.

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So, a lot of times, what we're doing now is more wholesale delivery. We do deliver to some of the restaurants downtown Fredericksburg. What were you going to say?

Thomas Roberson: When we first started, we started setting out front right here and putting our vegetables up on a little stand.

Anita Roberson: We had a tent where that pad is.

Thomas Roberson: And we would set out there and wave at people all day long. And we said, "These people think we're crazy." So, we stopped doing that. [Laugh] Because it wasn't very profitable to just sit out here and wait for someone to come and pick up a tomato. So, we tried several different things. We tried going to the food markets on the weekend, where all the farmers go when they set their stuff there. And that was okay, but it really just tied us up for the whole day, so we really didn't care that much for that. And the markets up north, we made more money in those markets, like in Dale City and those areas.

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We'd sell a cucumber down here for 25 cents. But when we'd go up there, we'd sell it for 75 cents, and the people would say, "Oh, it must be on sale." So, it made a difference. But the problem was, everywhere we went, we had to pack that stuff up when we left and bring it back. And if we didn't think it could last that long, then we'd have to take it to the food banks and just donate it rather than just let it rot. So, we decided that really wasn't a good thing, so we did the CSAs. And the CSAs turned into a really good thing for us because with the CSAs, they would give us a call, and they'd say, "We need 100 pounds of collards or 200 pounds of collards." So, we had the refrigeration unit, so we could take our time during the week and meet their demands, and then we would just take that to them, and they'd give us a check.

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So, we weren't stuck there all day long.

Anita Roberson: The CSA that we work with is the Fredericksburg CSA, and it's a collective of probably seven different farms.

Thomas Roberson: Mm-hmm. And everybody would bring whatever...

Anita Roberson: So, at the beginning of the year, we would provide what we plan to grow and when we think it would be available. Every week, they'll say, "What do you have available now?" And it's usually anywhere– I guess about 85 members for the large CSA, and then they have a smaller CSA of maybe 40. So, you get to kind of choose which one you're going to supply, and then they'll tell you what items they would like to purchase from you on a weekly basis.

Thomas Roberson: Yeah, and you just go there, drop it off, get your check, and come home. So, you're not stuck there all day long.

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Anita Roberson: And then, everybody has to either be organic or certified naturally grown. And you don't have to buy all these plastic bags. They prefer for it to be in paper or in nothing at all because they have containers.

Thomas Roberson: So, that turned out to be a really good thing for us. And especially since at that point, it was just the two of us. Now, we have a crew that comes in and helps us during the growing season and stuff. But when it was just her and I, time was just...

Anita Roberson: Of the essence, yeah.

Thomas Roberson: Yeah, yeah. So, that turned out to be really good. And the food banks, supplying the food banks turned out to be a good thing. We did that from Fredericksburg all the way to Fauquier County. So, we would make sure that they had stuff, and we enjoyed doing that because we would just go and deliver, and that was it.

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And we could come home, and I'd be home in time to watch Young and the Restless. [Laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: Perfect. [Laugh] Can you talk about the process of expanding your operation from whenever you first got started?

Anita Roberson: Well, I think the expansion kind of took on a life of its own. I think a lot of it was through networking and finding out what other farmers did, and them sharing their contacts and what they really enjoyed about whatever distribution point they were using, and

what the pitfalls were. And I know for us, going up and down 95, since I commuted to D.C. for such a long time, I know that's one of my, like, points that I don't want to do. And so, I think online sales is another avenue that COVID really opened up for farmers that previously, most farmers didn't even think about.

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And Fredericksburg is sort of like a commuter community, so if you have online commerce available to you as a farmer, you can kind of help people out that are looking for fresh produce, where they can order while they're at work, at lunchtime, or whatever, and you can have it ready for them. And they give you a pickup time. And for a lot of people, that's the way to go. They can pay for it online and keep rolling.

Thomas Roberson: Also, our productivity was sort of guided by marketing. And we couldn't keep up. When we started out with just one little 20x40 high tunnel, we were growing more and selling more, but we were running out. And that's what kind of generated into getting larger high tunnels and equipping them so that we could supply and meet demand.

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Because I learned early, you can grow a lot of good things, but if you can't market it, you've just wasted your time, your money.

Anita Roberson: And I think also, educating the community. When we first came, because we've had lots of experiences living lots of places that– a lot of people here have never left Fredericksburg, so they don't have a palette, or they're not willing to try different foods. And the first year, we grew pattypan squash, and they grew amazing. The people here thought they were

mushrooms. They had no clue how to cook them, what they were, and trying to market something to people that the only thing they want is crooked neck yellow squash. That's it.

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Thomas Roberson: Yeah, the yellow crooked neck squash is all they're used to, so we couldn't market it.

Anita Roberson: So, I had to cook some, we had to give it away and say, "Try this." Give them recipes on how to cook it. "You can have this for breakfast. Instead of eating white potatoes with onions and garlic, or however you like to season them, try the pattypan squash. They're very nutritious, they're delicious. They taste similar to the potato, and you can fix it the same way you're doing your potatoes."

Thomas Roberson: And the other thing we learned was beets. Beets, you either love them, or you hate them. [Laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: That is very true. [Laugh]

Thomas Roberson: And when we started growing beets the first year, no one really wanted the beets. And then, all of a sudden, this marketing campaign came out on television where, "Beets, the superfood." And now, we can't grow enough beets.

0:38:04

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Thomas Roberson: And we didn't do the marketing, someone else did.

Anita Roberson: Someone else did the marketing, and now everybody's on the bandwagon.

Thomas Roberson: Yeah, everybody wants beets now. [Laugh]

Anita Roberson: He has one person that will come, and he will buy all the beets we can produce.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow. Great customer.

Thomas Roberson: [Laugh] Yeah. So, the marketing has been a really good tool. And it's been a learning curve for us. Now, we try to grow things that we know we can market. And even though we can market them, sometimes if they're labor-intensive– like string beans. String beans are very labor-intensive because you have to go down that row every two or three days and pick those beans.

Anita Roberson: And they grow so fast.

Thomas Roberson: So, it's really labor-intensive for us. And if it's labor-intensive, then maybe we shouldn't do that.

Anita Roberson: Or either grow that for ourselves.

0:39:00

Thomas Roberson: Yeah. Yeah. So, we're finding out a little niche where we can make money and be comfortable. And ergonomics, because we're getting older.

Anita Roberson: Getting older? You're old. [Laugh]

Thomas Roberson: We're old people, yeah. [Laugh] Our cars draw Social Security. [Laugh]

Anita Roberson: [Laugh]

Thomas Roberson: So, yeah, we find that ergonomics is also important. And by using the raised beds, that means we don't have to bend over as far, and it cuts down on time and effort. So, raised beds have turned out to be a really good ergonomic tool for us. And as we go, I think we're learning as we grow. Yeah.

Anita Roberson: I think the other thing that's been really rewarding for us is, we've been fortunate to have young people from Northern Virginia find out about our farm. I had a friend who had a birthday party for her daughter, and she was interested in honeybees.

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So, she wanted me to come to the party and talk about bees, and I did, and I brought honey sticks and whatever. And from there, there were some teachers there. And an organization that really helps young people, Jack and Jill, one of the parents was affiliated with Jack and Jill. And so, she calls me up, and she wants to bring all these kids to the farm. So, I think it was, what, two months of kids that came down from the farm, and they had never been to a farm before. So, at the time, the flowers are in bloom, and I had them go through the flower field and make bouquets for their mom to take home, and they just thought that was just wonderful.

Thomas Roberson: And you gave them little plants, little collard green plants. And it was in the soil. And this one little girl, she said, "What is this?" I said, "This is the soil, and this is what they eat."

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Anita Roberson: The nutrients, yeah.

Thomas Roberson: "The nutrients from the soil." And she looked at it, and she said, "Where's the mouth?" [Laugh]

Anita Roberson: And just introducing kids to agriculture was such a joy. And then, he brought out the tractor, and they got to take their picture with the tractor. And they just thought they were the bee's knees. So, there's hope in just showing kids that agriculture can be fun. He also brought out his drone and showed them that the technology has come to the farm. So, those of you that are into your little computer games and like little joysticks, you can learn how to apply some of those skills to farming. So, I think that's the direction that we need to go with farming.

Thomas Roberson: And the drone is a really good technology because the 200 acres that we have out at Lake Anna, I used to walk it just to keep an eye on things.

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But now, I go out there, and I'll tell the drone how high to go, and it videos everything for me. Because at one point, we did have a problem with people stealing the wood. So, I could take a look and make sure that everything's growing, and there are no problems, and no patches of wood missing. And it just was easier on me to do that. And then, I could bring the drone back here, put it in the computer, and have myself a cup of coffee while I watched rather than walking. [Laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: That makes sense.

Thomas Roberson: Yeah, so the drone has been a good thing for us. And I use the drone here on the open fields because I'll just fly it over low. And if I see an area where something's not

growing right, then I know I've got problems with the irrigation line, if there's a fertilization problem or something, I need to go and take a look at that one particular area.

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So, it saves us time and money, using the technology that's available.

Sarah Rodriguez: Awesome. Could you talk a bit about some of the challenges that you've experienced with regenerative agriculture? Because in theory, it's a more challenging way of doing agriculture.

Anita Roberson: It is.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you describe some of the challenges you've faced?

Anita Roberson: Well, when I first started doing worm composting, he asked me what I wanted for Christmas one year, and I told him I wanted the fancy worm composting machine. And so, of course, I set it up in my living room because it said, "No odor. This is easy." Well, I love my worms too much because I gave them way too much food than they could handle. Next thing I know– if the environment isn't just right and everything isn't in balance– the worms escaped.

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We came downstairs, and worms were crawling all over the place. [Laugh] So, not really having a good understanding of what you're doing, and you charge into it, those kind of mistakes will happen. Let's see. Another instance– what were you going to say? [Laugh]

Thomas Roberson: The floor was moving. [Laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: No! I can't imagine.

Anita Roberson: [Laugh] So, that was really interesting. Another area that I'm aspiring to do, and this is part of the Climate-Smart program, is, because our farm here is half-forested, agriforestry is an area that is untapped for us as farmers. So, I'm looking forward to doing some mushroom farming and maybe growing herbs in my forest areas.

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But unlike my worms, I'm going to do my research and take some classes before I charge forward with that. So, I think it's just getting a really good understanding. Because a lot of times, I know I as a farmer, I'll get really excited thinking it's easier than what it is, and then I've got a half-baked project that I'm recovering from.

Thomas Roberson: And because of the growth of these areas, they're putting up housing developments all over the place, and they're just taking a lot of the forestry away. When we got here in 1992, we'd walk out back, if the deer saw us, they'd take off– big, beautiful white-tailed deer, they'd take off running back into the woods with that big, white, fluffy tail straight up in the air. And now, when they see us, they say, "What's up?" [Laugh] They just stand around. I think they're going to start asking me for cigarette money.

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They just stand around there. [Laugh] So, they're not as...

Anita Roberson: I think they just kind of get used to us.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you talk about maybe some of the successes that you've had that you can remember? You talked about the kids kind of coming to the farm, that's one of them. Any other successes that you've had doing this regenerative agriculture path?

Anita Roberson: We were recognized by the local Sierra Club as– what is it called? In 2022, the Living Green Award. I thought that was really neat because they had read about us and saw some of the things that we were doing on our farm. And they...

Thomas Roberson: And we were also selected to be the Virginia Small Farm of the Year.

Anita Roberson: Yeah, in 2015. I think they felt sorry for us. [Laugh] Because we kept coming to training, and coming to training, and coming to training. [Laugh]

Thomas Roberson: Yep, getting it better, making it better. So, we improved a lot.

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We improved our marketing. We did pretty good that year. Fortunately for us, our careers before farming were really, really financially pleasing, and we don't really need the farm to survive. We do it, but we don't really make a lot of money for ourselves. We use the money to do scholarships and stuff like that for kids. Our accountant told us that we really need to start drawing a salary or the IRS is going to look at this like a hobby. [Laugh] So, I think this year, we went on and gave ourselves a little salary so we could declare it, and they could make some money. But it's not something we really need to do, it's just something that we like.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. Could you talk a bit about– and y'all have traveled around the world. What do you think is the role of doing farming in the South? Do you think that regenerative agriculture has a southern aspect to it? Do you think it doesn't matter? What are your thoughts on that?

Anita Roberson: I think regenerative agriculture is for everyone. No matter where you're located, the practices are the same. I don't think it's taken on, I guess, a forward movement as much in the South because people still like to have their pesticides. And I can kind of understand if you've got a farm that's 1,000 acres, and you're being run over by some pest, that you've got to do something. You can't stop and pick off every beetle. [Laugh]

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Thomas Roberson: And usually farms of that size, they do grow crops, and it's just nothing but corn, or soy beans, or something.

Anita Roberson: And it's usually mechanized.

Thomas Roberson: They don't do a variety of anything. They just do what they can do and make the money. And they're the ones that usually do the spraying, and the insecticides, and pesticides, and fungicides for whatever crop they're growing. And fortunately for us, we don't have any of those farms within about a five-mile radius.

Anita Roberson: So, we don't have to too much worry about it.

Thomas Roberson: So, that really helps us, and it helps the bees, too. Because if you've got a farm spraying something, you're going to kill the bees. So, just being right here in this area, it works for us.

Anita Roberson: The one thing, I guess, to me that's been challenging, I don't know if you saw across the street, there's this junkyard that was put in maybe two years ago.

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So, it kind of has me on high alert because I'm sure the chemicals from the cars, the antifreeze, the oils, all that stuff is leeching into the soil. So, we do have our water tested every year.

Thomas Roberson: And our soil, too, yeah.

Anita Roberson: And our soil tested. Because I'm afraid because he's at a higher plane than I am. That water's got to run downstream.

Thomas Roberson: And I have a little nose problem, so I fly my drone over there because I'm nosy. [Laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: Love that.

Anita Roberson: Yeah. And I was thankful they did put the fence up.

Thomas Roberson: Yeah, so it looks better.

Anita Roberson: Because at first, there was no fence.

Sarah Rodriguez: It was just the junkyard?

Anita Roberson: It was just– and I was like, "Oh." So, God heard my prayer. [Laugh]

Thomas Roberson: But we haven't had any problem with any type of leeching into the soil. So far, everything's doing well, so we're okay.

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Anita Roberson: So, that's one of the things that– you can't own all the land. [Laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you talk a bit about some of the future plans that you have for the farm going forward?

Anita Roberson: Well, one of my hopes for next year, since Rob and I– our son passed a couple years ago, and I want to see this property remain in agriculture. So, my goal for next year is to get some type of easement in place so that it can remain hopefully in perpetuity in agriculture. Some kind of easement. So, that's one of the research items I've been kind of doing on and off to look at.

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Thomas Roberson: And considering putting it in a trust.

Anita Roberson: And a trust. So, I'd just hate to see this go up in apartments, housing development, or whatever.

Sarah Rodriguez: That makes sense.

Anita Roberson: And I guess the thing that was so beautiful about Europe was, when we were in Germany, it had its urban area, and then it had its rural area where people farmed. And we lived on the economy, and our landlords were just really beautiful people. And they had a farm. And of course, we would go with them on their farm and help them. And they would grow asparagus, which they call spargel, and their asparagus is white because they don't allow it to see the sun. And so, the chlorophyl is what gives our asparagus the green color.

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And because it doesn't see the sun, it's so tender, it tastes like butter. And they make asparagus soup. It's just really delicious. Just working with them on the weekends on their farm, that was just a beautiful experience. It was family bonding. The grandmother would be out there. And Oma Louisa was probably in her 80s then. And she was in incredible shape. I remember one day,

she says, "Anita." They don't move their cars, not unless there are, like, five people in the car because gas is so expensive. So, we would ride bicycles. And she says, "We're going to go get ice cream in the next village." Well, I had no idea how far the next village was. And I was in really good shape. I was running, like, five miles every other day back then.

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So, I thought, "I'm on the bicycle with this woman who's 80 years old, so it can't be that bad."

That woman rode that bike...

Thomas Roberson: She smoked her. [Laugh]

Anita Roberson: She smoked me. I could not wait until I could get off that bike. That's how hard this woman could ride the bike. And I think that's the other thing. People miss out on the exercise that's gained through agriculture and working in the forest. They have this whole concept of forest bathing. Just the whole stress-free living that you encounter and just the– I don't know, it's just something touching the soil. It's like that movie Avatar when they're touching the plants and that connection. And I feel that same connection with the soil.

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Sarah Rodriguez: It makes sense.

Anita Roberson: It's just beautiful.

Sarah Rodriguez: I love that. Before we wrap up, is there any stories or anything I didn't ask about that you want to mention?

Anita Roberson: I can't think of anything. Any stories that you wanted to add?

Thomas Roberson: Once upon a time...

Anita Roberson: Oh, stop. [Laugh]

Thomas Roberson: [Laugh]

Anita Roberson: Oh, I was reading an article, and this kind of brought me full circle to the whole farming aspect. And I think I saw it on Instagram, [doorbell rings] where this funeral home in Washington State is doing composting cremations, and it got me thinking about when I go, would I like to have a composting? I wanted to be cremated, but I'm rethinking the whole process, that maybe the composting might be a better way to go. I don't know how my husband feels about it.

0:56:11

Thomas Roberson: What's that?

Anita Roberson: Instead of being cremated, being composted.

Thomas Roberson: Oh, no.

Anita Roberson: [Laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: Not for you?

Thomas Roberson: That reminded me, when we were in Georgia, our next-door neighbor, he had a little area he grew some vegetables in.

Anita Roberson: He had a beagle.

Thomas Roberson: And he brought us over some vegetables that he had picked from the garden. And I said, "Oh, man, thank you. Thank you." And I said, "I haven't seen your dog for a while. Where's your dog?" And he said, "I buried him in the garden." [Laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, no.

Thomas Roberson: I did not want the vegetables. [Laugh] Yeah, so no to the composting.

[Laugh] No, I don't think so.

0:57:05

Anita Roberson: But that's nature's way of returning everything. It's the cycle of life.

[Laugh]

Thomas Roberson: Okay. [Laugh] Just leave them on top of grave. Buzzards got to eat same as the worms. [Laugh]

Sarah Rodriguez: Well, thank you so much. I appreciate your time.

Anita Roberson: Oh, thank you. Thank you.

[End]