

On Being A Farmer: Conversations With Professor Kwasi Densu

- 1. *What is your name and is farming the only thing you do?*** My name is Kwasi Densu. Farming is not the only thing that I do. I am a father, husband, son, friend and brother. I am also a community organizer and professor of political science at Florida A & M University. For all of these reasons I am also a farmer.



Image source: USDA; accessed via [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/usda/).

- 2. *Why farm?*** Farming is important for multiple reasons. The first is that everyone should be able to produce/make those things that we fundamentally need as human beings. Food is one such need. The second reason is that western, industrial society teaches us that nature is something we should conquer and/or admire from afar. Farming teaches us that we are a part of nature that we are forever dependent on Earth for our existence. Third, the current food system is detrimental to our health and well being. Knowing where our food comes from is extremely important. What better way to do this than to grow your own food for family, friends and community?

- 3. *How did you get started?*** I have always had a deep love and respect for nature. As a child I wanted to be a veterinarian. This led me to attend an agricultural high school. The school's curriculum taught all of the agricultural sciences. After graduating I did not take an immediate interest in farming. It was not until my graduate studies at Clark Atlanta University that I began to study the history and problems of farmers of African descent around the world. At the same time I developed an interest in growing my own food.



Image source [Pxfuel.com](https://www.pxfuel.com/).

- 4. *How can I get started?*** Anyone can learn and start to grow food at any time. The first misconception is that to be a farmer you must have

a lot of land. This is a narrow conception of what it means to be a farmer. Anyone who grows food, in large or small spaces, is a farmer. For those interested in growing your own food, here are two excellent online resources:

Videos: BadAss Farmer:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLNYrOA99dMm0k72BMOY_2JK4woNSsyVN6

Book: How To Grow More Vegetables

<http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/213672/how-to-grow-more-vegetables-eighth-edition-by-john-jeavons-foreword-by-alice-waters/9781607741893/>



Image source: USDA; accessed via [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/usda/).

5. *How much time and money is required of me?* This depends on your goals and objectives. The larger the area the more resources (time and money) that will be needed. For less than \$50 a small garden area (100 square feet) can be created to grow food. This area can be maintained by spending 30 minutes to an hour, three times per week. As you scale up, you will spend more time and financial resources. I have maintained small gardens and small market farms. A market farm serves local communities and farmers markets. Typically it is no larger than 2 acres.

6. *How much time and money do you spend farming?* This is a hard question to answer. Right now I maintain a small garden in FAMU's community garden on Orange Avenue. It is very inexpensive to maintain. Over the course of a year I may spend about \$200-\$400. Typically you spend more time in the warm months in the garden. On average 3-5 hours per week during the summers. The time commitment however, is very dependent upon your skill level and the techniques one uses to grow food. There are



Photo by Lawrence Jackson; accessed via [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/lawrencejackson/).

many ways to grow food that maximize the use of time, energy and financial resources.

7. What types of support are available to you?

Because of social media and the Internet there are literally hundreds of resources available for both information and supplies like seeds, tools, etc. In Tallahassee you have several gardening supply stores. In addition, there is a local organization called the Tallahassee Food



Image by Jeff Schuler from [Wikimedia](#).

Network. They assist people interested in growing food within our communities. There is also the Leon County Extension Office on Paul Russell Road. Finally, FAMU is a *land grant institution*. This means that one of the primary roles it plays is to teach people and communities how to grow food. Since I am a small farmer, I also depend heavily on family and friends.

8. Where is the land you farm on? Currently we have a garden plot at FAMU's community garden on Orange Avenue. In addition, we are developing a small farm in Quincy, Florida.

9. What kinds and types of things do you grow? We grow many things. Some of our favorites are tomatoes, zucchini squash, yellow squash, bananas, callaloo, mint, green beans, spinach, sweet corn, onions, rosemary, watermelon and lemons.



Image from Seattle Parks; accessed via [Flickr.com](#).

10. What happens with the food once it is harvested? We grow primarily for *subsistence*. This simply means that we grow the food we eat. Typically we consume some of what we grow and we give food away to family, friends, co-workers and the community.

11. Who is helped by what you grow? Family, friends and the community.

12. Who eats the food? Family, friends, co-workers and the community

13. What do you want to grow in the future that you are not growing now? I would like to grow more medicinal plants. I think it is important to see food as *medicine*. In the United States food is primarily consumed based on what “tastes good,” not necessarily *what is good for you*. Both are actually important. I also want to grow foods that are unique to the African-American community. Food is deeply shaped by culture. The *foodways* of African people is something that I spend a lot of time studying. There are foods that our people brought to the Americas when we were enslaved. Things like rice, watermelon, peanuts and sesame seed were brought to the Americas by our ancestors.



Photo credit: X. Fonseca/CIMMYT; accessed via [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/xosofonseca/).

14. Can you (or I) make a living doing this? This is a complex question. Making a living as a small farmer in the United States is very difficult for multiple reasons. I make a living as a professor at FAMU. This is where I get my income. I grow food to feed my family and community. For me, access to food is a right, not a privilege. Everyone should have access to plentiful, safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate food regardless of one’s income level. This is a problem in the United States. My purpose for growing food is to be healthy and to live with dignity. I do not grow food to make money.

15. Do you know people who make a living as an urban farmer? I do know some people who make a living as urban farmers but they are few and far between.

16. How well are they doing living this type of life? It is a difficult lifestyle to lead in the United States because of complex political, economic and social problems. For instance, the cost of land is extremely expensive in the United States. At the same time the cost of food is typically inexpensive. Because of this it is very difficult for an urban farmer to compete with grocery stores



Photo credit: USDA.

and large farmers in the American market place. Typically the urban farmer has to charge more for his/her product, and they do not sell as much. In addition, land and water resources in urban areas are typically more expensive than in rural areas. These factors make it extremely difficult as well. Race is also a large factor. African-American farmers typically do not have the same resources as white farmers. In addition, white people typically have more disposable income to purchase organic, locally produced food. This all contributes to making it difficult for African-American, urban farms to be viable economically.