

Farming While Black Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land

By Leah Penniman
368 pages
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Reviewed by Molly DeVore

Back in February, as I prepared to attend the MOSES Organic Farming Conference in La Crosse, Wis., I caught a news report about cases of something called “COVID-19” popping up in the U.S. At the time, this information was unnerving, but the idea of a pandemic still felt distant. As we now know, a lot has changed since then.

At the conference, I was particularly struck by the words of keynote speaker Leah Penniman, operator of Soul Fire Farm and author of *Farming While Black*. I remember being shocked by her speech — something, I as a white woman who for many years accepted the white-washed and rewritten version of history she was fed, should be used to by now. As Penniman stood in a room full of mostly white farmers and explained the Afro-Indigenous roots of all the regenerative farming practices we know today, I realized just how deep my miseducation had gone.

While I thought Penniman’s speech was eye-opening at the time, I now realize just how relevant her words are to the times we’ve come to live in since. This year began with people stocking up on rolls of toilet paper and cans of beans, fearing our supply chains would crumble. Now, Black people and other people of color across the country are educating white people on the reality that they have never been able to rely on or trust our traditional systems.

The pandemic and the protests that have emerged in the wake of George Floyd’s murder may, at first glance, not seem directly connected. In fact, the turmoil that has resulted sheds light on just how broken our current infrastructure is. It’s times like this that the basics of life — being able to feed our communities, for example — are critical. During Penniman’s keynote, she quoted civil rights activist and founder of the Freedom Farm Cooperative, Fannie Lou Hamer, who said, “If you have 400 quarts of greens and gumbo soup canned for the winter, nobody can push you around or tell you what to say or do.”

This emphasis on self-sufficiency in service of the greater good is expanded upon in Penniman’s *Farming While Black*, which emphasizes the importance of going outside of societal infrastructure to provide for your community.

Penniman’s very decision to start Soul Fire Farm in upstate New York in 2010 was motivated by the fact that she and her husband were raising two young children in an area dominated by a form of “food apartheid.” When her neighbors learned she had farming experience, they asked when she was going to start a farm to feed the community.

Over the past decade, Penniman and her team have used Afro-Indigenous agroforestry, silvopasturing, wildcrafting, and polyculture practices to regenerate 80 acres of mountainside land. They now produce fruits, medicinal plants, pasture-raised livestock, honey, mushrooms, vegetables, and preserves. The majority of their harvest goes to people living under food apartheid or those impacted by state violence. Penniman weaves her personal experience throughout the book, using what she has learned to set the stage for each chapter.

It is clear that her lived experience as a Black woman who has been able to find healing through farming is integral to the book. Penniman describes the devastating impacts of generations of violence occurring on the land through slavery, convict leasing, sharecropping and more. In addition, wealth gaps and systemic racism have disconnected Black communities from key farm and food systems.

Early on, Penniman describes the damage this disconnection

produces. “Black youth are well aware that the system does not value their lives,” she writes. As one young Black man said while visiting Soul Fire Farm, “Look, you’re going to die from the gun or you are going to die from bad food.”

This passage illustrates the many forms violence against Black communities can take and the often-unseen role food plays.

Later, the book delves even deeper into the intersection of food and systemic racism. Penniman writes that the forced shift away from traditional African diets has been a disaster, and that Black people are 10 times more likely to die from poor diets than from all forms of physical violence combined.

Using a writing style that is as straightforward, inspiring, and information-packed as her public presentations, Penniman’s goal with this richly illustrated book is to help Black farmers return to the land, addressing both the issue of access to healthy and culturally appropriate food and working to heal some of the past and present traumas that have occurred. Hence the subtitle of the book: *Soul Fire Farm’s Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land*.

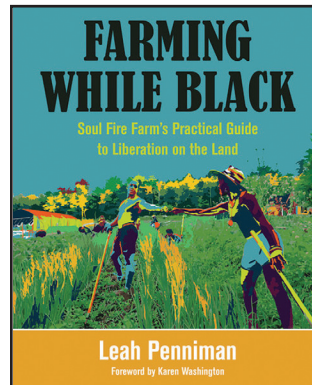
Despite the title of the book, the range of lessons included ensure that anyone with an interest in just, sustainable food systems will find it worthwhile. Penniman pairs hands-on skills with advice on how to enact structural change, making it clear that learning how to set up drip irrigation is just as important as learning how to decolonize farming practices. After all, the final chapter is titled, “White People Uprooting Racism.”

The book also looks at the complex relationship humans have with the land, intertwining both practical farming knowledge and traditional Afro-Indigenous spirituality. While some chapters lay out how to conduct soil tests, others include traditional Haitian songs used to honor the spirits of the land.

One passage that exemplifies the duality of the book discusses the importance of agroforestry for soil restoration: “Not only is the cooperation of the forest a profound guide for how we need to exist in human community, it’s also a practical survival strategy. We want our cultivated lands to be a part of that network with the native forests,” she writes.

These technical farming skills and guidance for how to respect and work with the land are invaluable. But some of Penniman’s best, and most timely, advice comes in her chapters on how to access the land and capital necessary to begin farming.

These chapters explain the large disparities between white and Black farmers — that Black households earn only 59 cents for every dollar of white median household income, that white neighborhoods have an average of four times as many supermarkets as predominantly Black neighborhoods, that Black people own only 1% of U.S. rural land, and that 80% of wealth is inherited and can often be traced back to slavery. It turns out several of the speakers at recent Black Lives Matter protests have discussed this idea of generational wealth. Vanessa McDowell, the CEO of the YWCA in Madison, Wis., spoke at one march about the lack of



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**“To free ourselves, we must
feed ourselves.”**

— Leah Penniman
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generational wealth in the Black community and how white people can go beyond just being allies and become “co-conspirators” by directing money to communities that lack this key resource.

“... generational wealth within the Black community basically doesn’t exist,” McDowell said. “White people just don’t understand it because they are so used to having money passed down to them.”

While McDowell’s comments focused on increasing home ownership in the Black

community to address gentrification, this notion of wealth redistribution is just as important when it comes to farming and agricultural land ownership.

Penniman describes her struggle to obtain land and how she had to settle for marginal acres on a mountainside. Over time, she and her family were able to build up the organic matter in that hardscrabble soil, but lack of generational wealth was a major hindrance. For too many Black farmers and other farmers of color, it’s an insurmountable barrier.

Early in *Farming While Black*, Penniman lays out the three essential ingredients for any beginning farmer: training, land, and material resources. Black farmers and other farmers of color have continued to have land, resources, and even cultural knowledge stolen from them. In an effort to address these barriers, Soul Fire Farm has created

a reparations map (<https://bit.ly/3jkGqfL>) where Black farmers and farmers of color can list what they need so that those with resources can connect with them.

This redistribution of wealth and resources within the farming community is essential and more relevant than ever. Because, as Penniman writes toward the end of her eye-opening book, “To free ourselves, we must feed ourselves.” □

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Membership Update

Election Day is Nov. 3 — Are You Registered?

The date for casting ballots in the general election is **Tuesday, November 3**. Put democracy in action today by planning ahead and preparing to vote:

- To make sure you have a plan to vote, see <https://bit.ly/31yxflc>.
- To check your voter registration status and register to vote if you are not already, see <https://bit.ly/3aZPwDZ>.

→ Here in Minnesota, we can vote absentee in advance of Election Day by mail or in-person. To request an absentee ballot be sent to you so you can vote-by-

mail, see <https://bit.ly/3gxI4YS>.

→ Some cities and towns in Minnesota only use vote-by-mail. You can find out if you live in one of those places by using the Secretary of State’s Poll Finder at <https://bit.ly/3hx7c3p>.

→ Already voted by mail? Track the status of your mail-in ballot to ensure it has been accepted at <https://bit.ly/31BenSF>.

→ If you are not a Minnesota resident and need help registering to vote in your home state, e-mail Emily Minge at eminge@landstewardshipaction.org to receive the correct links.

Finally, check-in with people you know to ensure they’re registered to vote, have a plan to vote, and have the support they need to vote-by-mail. LSP’s sister organization, the Land Stewardship Action Fund (LSAF), has created a program — Land Stewardship: Democracy in Action — to help with having these conversations with your networks. See www.landstewardshipaction.org/take-action/sign-up for details on signing up.

For more information on LSAF, see www.landstewardshipaction.org, or contact Megan Jekot at 612-442-9899, mjekot@landstewardshipaction.org. □



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- ◆ SSND/Kathleen Mary Kiemen

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- ◆ Janne Gossman & Family
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