



Wife and Husband duo Shante Johnson and Arthur Shavers
Owners of Mudbone Grown, working farm and learning garden



Mudbone owners host a variety of workshops intent on engaging more minorities into the farming trade.

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MUDBONE

By Tiara Darnell

While the term “locavore” may have been coined in the Bay area, the buy local, eat local movement is practically baked into the culture of the City of Roses. Come summertime, the abundance of Oregon’s agriculture will be on full display at over two-dozen farmers markets across the Portland Metro area. And so will the reality that many of these farming operations are predominately owned and operated by aging, white farmers.

Enter Unity Farm.

Adjacent to the Oregon Food Bank’s (OFB) headquarters (7900 NE 333rd Drive.), the one-acre plot of land, which was once a horse stable and training ground for Portland’s Black Buffalo Soldiers, is now a working farm and learning garden. Owned by the OFB and operated by the Black-owned enterprise, Mudbone Grown, LLC, the business’ founders, husband and wife, Shante Johnson and Arthur L. Shavers, Jr., both went through the Beginning Urban Farmer Training program offered through Oregon State University. They both have personal experience in farming: Johnson’s family grew their own produce at home on their property near Oregon City. As a young man, Shavers, a talented leather craftsman, learned about farming and working with his hands from his uncles and grandparents. A friend, who had already nicknamed him “Mudbone”, inspired the two to name their business “Mudbone Grown.” “[Art] lives in the city...but he’s country at heart,” laughed Johnson. “When we heard ‘Mudbone Grown’, we were like yep, that’s perfect.”

Initially, naysayers didn’t expect that Mudbone Grown would receive much enthusiasm or public support. “Some people, even from our own community, didn’t believe that we were actually going to be farming, because they couldn’t see it,” said Johnson. “People were like ‘you shouldn’t be doing a [community shared agriculture program] in your first year. You could mess up. There’s too much room for error.’ And yet last year, Unity Farm welcomed over 700 volunteers, partnered with local non-profits like Hacienda and Outside In to bring fresh food to older adults in the Cully neighborhood and was awarded a \$200,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to fund the Beginning Farmers of Color training program that launched this past January. The enthusiasm from the local community was bigger than they could have imagined. “When fifty-something people showed up to the first [Beginning Farmer] info session and packed the second one, I just cried,” recalled Johnson. “I knew the support was there. I just knew it!”

A few weeks into the New Year, Mudbone Grown is already fielding requests to volunteer at the farm. Would-be volunteers will have to wait until later in the growing season to lend a hand though. Right now, Johnson and Shavers are focusing their energy on the cohort of 11 beginning farmers, most of whom are from the Portland area. Together, they’ll be preparing to lay the seed for a variety of fruits and vegetables, culturally specific to predominately Latino and African populations. Come summer, Unity Farm and Mudbone Grown’s second farm off NE 66th and Simpson, will be thriving with food ready to nourish underrepresented communities in Portland.

“Historically, people of color in Oregon have been cut off from land usage and ownership opportunities, because of the state’s well-documented legacy of racial exclusion”.

What Mudbone Grown is doing for the Portland area community, is timely and much needed, if Oregon is to maintain its current level of agricultural industry. According to a recent study by Oregon State University, Portland State University and Rogue Farm Corps, the average age of the Oregon farmer is 60 years old. As these farmers age, their farmland—more than 10.4 million acres or 64% of Oregon’s farmland—is expected to change hands in the next 20 years. Who will take control of this land once its available, is yet to be determined.

In developing the training program for beginning farmers, Shavers and Johnson thought about the barriers they faced breaking into the industry and how they could make it easier for others to do so. The ability to pay beginning farmers a stipend while participating in the program, was a must.

By the end of their residency, Johnson and Shavers hope to be able to secure a modest parcel of land for each of Mudbone Grown’s beginning farmers. The idea is to equip them with the know-how and a business plan to be able to independently run their own farms the following year. “The plan is that they’ll grow their own vegetables and contribute a portion to the Mudbone CSA,” explained Shaver. “This is all about changing the narrative of what it means to be black and a farmer.”

In the coming months, visitors to Unity Farm can expect to see a new chicken coup, greenhouse and classroom on-site. The classroom will provide a space for Mudbone Grown to bring visitors onto the farm for a variety of food justice-oriented classes and workshops, thanks to existing and new partnerships.

To learn more about Unity Farm and how to get involved, visit Mudbone Grown’s Facebook page. A new website and blog featuring stories from beginning farmers will launch in the spring.