

RTD-414

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# Dr. Gail Myers, Anthropologist & Urban Farmer

Posted on [September 8, 2015](#)



— Gail Myers (far right)  
COURTESY OF GAIL MYERS

Dr. Gail Myers is a cultural anthropologist who earned her Doctorate in Anthropology from The Ohio State University, her Masters in Applied Anthropology from Georgia State University and her Bachelors in English from Florida State University.

In 2001, Dr. Myers organized the first statewide conference for African American farmers in [Ohio Sustaining Communities: Ohio's Black Farmers at the Crossroads](#).



In 2005, Dr. Myers organized the 19<sup>th</sup> California Small Farm Conference in Ventura, CA,

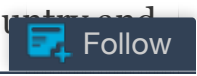
In 2004, Dr. Myers founded [Farms to Grow, Inc.](#)

In 2013 Dr. Myers founded the Freedom Farmers Market in partnership with farmers, business owners, and makers, and community vendors who cooperate to bring the Freedom Farmers Market to West Oakland.



**Q: Why are urban farms important?**

Gail Myers: Urban farms fill in the needed gaps for local food needs. Most of the need for fresh food in urban centers is from low-wealth community members. Those who live in the so-called food deserts. Where corner stores with liquor and tobacco products are more prevalent than fresh foods. Urban farms could address a real food need for those without real access to good safe food. Most of the food that is consumed by people in low income communities is so toxic. It's no secret why people are so ill in this country and



dying from preventable food related diseases. The poor quality food, goes hand in hand with poor quality of life in many areas, lead to early deaths.

Early urban farms, or the Victory Gardens were important during the depression and helped communities survive. Certainly, we're not in a national economic depression, but we are in a fresh food depression in many areas, albeit not across all class categories. What we really need are the people in urban communities growing their own foods and less of the hipsters coming into these areas and setting up these gardens and calling them community gardens but they're not for the community because the community is being gentrified and no place for the folks in the community to afford to live.



- Gail Meyers educates Oakland youth about food and urban agriculture through her nonprofit organization, Farms to Grow. She and other black food justice workers are the subjects of the new documentary short, '16 Seeds.' (Photo by: Melinda James)

### **Q: What does you organization Farms to Grow do?**

GM: Farms to Grow, Inc. works directly one on one with farmers, schools, churches, organizations, individuals to connect them to each other.

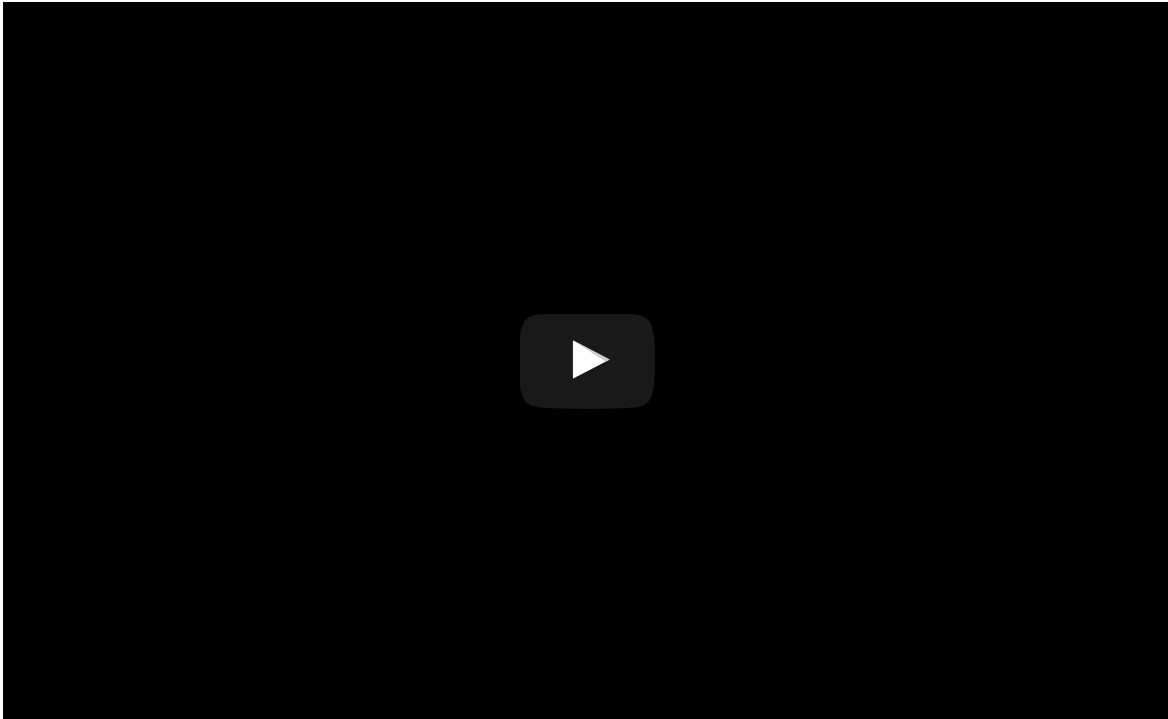


mission is to assist Black farmers and other socially disadvantaged farmers, maintain and grow their farms. We help farmers get the support they need, in areas of — farm labor, plants, seeds, livestock, legal help, farm management, inventory development and other areas that farmers request. We also make sure the next generation is trained and is as excited about farming and gardening as the current farmers.

Our Gardens to Grow program takes us into schools, daycare centers, YMCA's, summer programs, festivals, fairs, and other areas to teach the joy of gardening to youth and their families. We also launch and manage farmers markets. Currently, we have operating every Saturday the Freedom Farmers Market in Oakland. This market is a gathering place for the community where they can meet California Black farmers and food entrepreneurs, and other black independent businesses at the market. We create a powerful cultural expression around food each week and this market presents another alternative to the current farmers market models. At the Freedom Farmers Market, we have watermelon eating contests, pea shelling contests, 6 week cooking academy, poetry readings, dance, community gatherings and much more.

Farms to Grow, Inc. also has had our Young chefs program where we teach cooking to 3<sup>rd</sup> graders in San Francisco school. We were in the same school for 5 years and taught over 120 students, mostly girls, the cooking basics and gardening too.





**Q: Tell us how farming and cooking empowers young people?**

GM: Farming and cooking both are like watching something grow from a seed into a plant or from a raw plant product into a finished product on the plate.

There is power in the land and there is power in the food.

When you give young people the access to channel that power in both, they connect with those parts of themselves that are ancestor and spirit based. They will benefit from the power of connection no doubt.

Farming has a spiritual component that many don't acknowledge or understand. There is something to say about learning at a young age your power to produce and not to just consume. Or to create not to just devour.





**Q: What can you say about your documentary *Rhythms of the Land*?**

GM: This documentary is America's missing agricultural narrative. We have not honored, appreciated, acknowledged, or even named that Black farmers ever existed in the agricultural movement at all.

In this film, we hear from the farmers themselves what it was like for them to live in the 1900's and remember their parents who lived in the 1800's tell them about the land. There is the rhythm in the land that only those close to it can hear.

The documentary will introduce for the first time and expand for some what Black farmers believed, loved, feared, gave, and kept giving to sustain the land. In the process of doing this film, I discovered my own families' farming roots and that we still have land in the family from 1903. How was my family able to hang on to their land after so many lost theirs? My story will be one of the many, like so many of us in this country that don't even know we have land in the family and that same resiliency to keep the land, helped us to be able to sustain our wits today.



I hope to be able to open up the portal so many of those can too hear the rhythms of the land.



- Nicodemus, Kansas is the only remaining western community established by African Americans after the Civil War. Nicodemus, Kansas in 1885. NPR story featuring the Nicodemus historian: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4503065>

### **Q: What can you tell us about towns like Nicodemus, Kansas?**

GM: Wow, Nicodemus, was a haven for hope for many Blacks leaving the South moving towards the West. Started by Blacks moving trying to find a better life and raise a family. These farmers owned 1000's of acre as of land and grew their own food. They were wheat farmers, ranchers, and vegetable farmers. There are still a handful of the original families still farming the land. What I studied in my research its that the role of the farmers was critical to the survival and development of the town.

The farmers were the pastors, they were the business owners, they gave the land for the earliest schools and other community learning institutions. Nicodemus gave Black people a reason to hope that America could fulfill its promise of the pursuit of happiness for those who worked hard and stayed true to their beliefs. The town has celebrated 130+ years of existence because the families that had the land made sure they kept it in their hands. Also, it's really off the beaten path and not in the path of development. But it





been developed or destroyed by now if not for the its remote location.

There are a few of the original all black towns still around, towns like Nicodemus, KS, Allensworth, CA, Mound Bayou, MS, all of which I have visited speak to the spirit of a people who refuse to give up or give in. They keep fighting for what the original descendants wanted those towns to become, places where Blacks could thrive, not just survive. These towns were and still can be economic engines for the region and provide a place for those wanting to live outside of an urban community but want to still be part of a family network.



— Young Chefs

**Q: Gail, thank you for your time, is there anything else that you would like us to know?**

GM: We have to eat to live and we can support our farmers and live a quality of life that protects the environment, takes care of the land, the farmers, the consumers, and if done correctly replenishes the soil as we take food out of it.

Humans have lived in partnership with animals, and plants that evolved with



us for our benefits. We went mildly crazy killing ourselves and the planet trying to feed ourselves. It makes no sense that we can't do both feed ourselves, replenish the planet in the process. Small and traditional farmers have been doing this for over 10,000 years. It's really very simple, if we eat to live a good healthy life, the planet will also achieve the health that it constantly deserves. After all, we stand on the skin of this planet and the least we can do as sentient beings is to take care of our mother earth.




— <http://blackurbangrowers.org/>




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2 THOUGHTS ON "DR. GAIL MYERS, ANTHROPOLOGIST & URBAN FARMER"





Larry Saltzman

on **September 10, 2015 at 6:42 pm** said:

Impressive work. I think urban farming is critical for the future and may be the path to sustainable, healthy diets as industrial agriculture collapses in the future. That you have made it community based is wonderful.



**ebonierika**

on **February 12, 2016 at 12:48 am** said:

Reblogged this on [Be, and It Is Homestead](#) and commented:

Gail Myers was on my list of folks to cover so while researching Che Axum I saw this I was thinking thanks for another great blog post.

It is an interview with video embedded so be sure to check it out.

“Farming has a spiritual component that many don’t acknowledge or understand.

There is something to say about learning at a young age your power to produce and not just to consume. Or create not just to devour.” Gail Meyers

