

# BUILDING RICH SOIL

*COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACHES AMONG  
MIDWEST GROWERS*

20  
23







*DEDICATED TO*  
*those seeking*  
*to*  
*grow*  
CONNECTION  
*and*  
MEANING

"Yes, resist the onslaught of oppression, but measure our success not just by what we stop, but by how many of us feel and can say:

"I am living a life I don't regret  
A life that will resonate with my ancestors, and with as many generations forward as I can imagine.

I am attending to the cries of my time with my best self,  
I am of communities that are doing our collective best to honor our ancestors and all humans to come."

(Emergent Strategy p.55)



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# ABOUT THE CONTENTS

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This project developed out of a curiosity to understand the values, infrastructure and goals that drive community-centered farms and gardens. Inspired by the work and values of Indigenous scholars and land stewards, we wanted to learn more about alternatives to farming driven by industrialism and capital. Through dialogue and storytelling, we interviewed 4 community farming and garden projects from Indiana, whose mission centers social change and sustainability. Our open-ended interviews explored what community-based growers value, how their values shape their work, and the successes and difficulties of living into non-industrial farming practices.

We designed this zine with the goal to share knowledge and learn from one another, creating space for reflection and future-planning. We invite you to dig into this interactive zine., making these pages your own - doodle in the margins, taken notes for reference, or use the pages for paper beads and seed packets.



# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

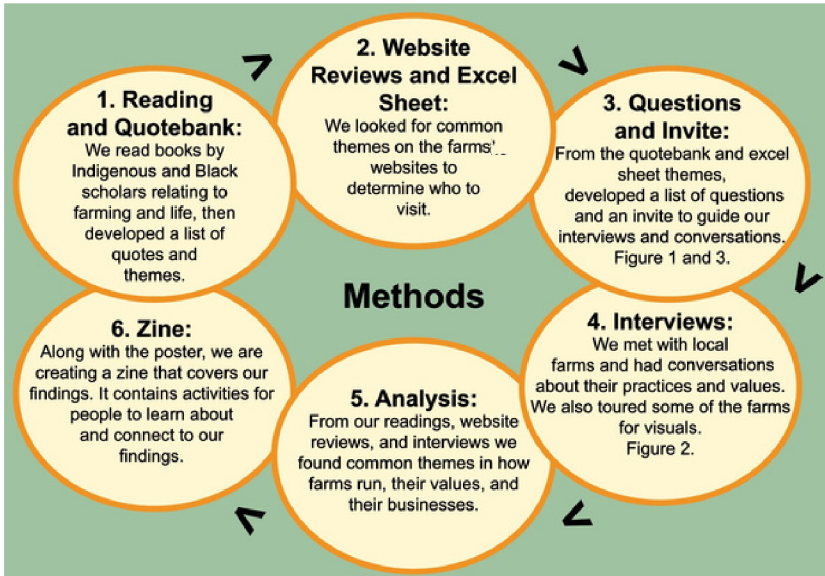
What values show up in small midwest farms and sustainability projects that center community?

How do these values interact with surrounding capitalist and industrial infrastructure?

What role does identity and history play in community-centered farming?



## METHODS:



# LITERATURE REVIEW

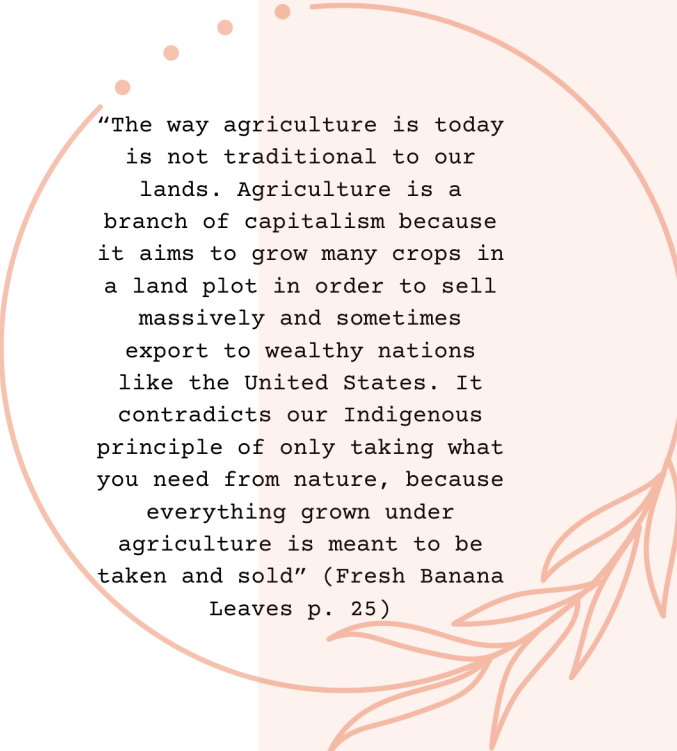
## What alternative growing practices are possible?

Humans have co-evolved with plants for hundreds of thousands of years, foraging and tending to forests, deserts, prairies and beyond.

The industrial farming that dominates Indiana today is part of a recent human change that views nature as an extractable resource (capitalism), rather than as a collaborator. To better understand the latter lens, we turned to authors who helped us identify some values that undergird anti-capitalist growing practices.

"Emergent strategy is something I am still discovering, but a lot of it, for me, feels like tuning into the natural operating systems of this universe and being humbled, as opposed to trying to barrel through and against all the change, trying to best nature. I am learning to see human behavior, even my own mistakes, as part of a larger natural order."

(Emergent Strategy, p. 75-6)



"The way agriculture is today is not traditional to our lands. Agriculture is a branch of capitalism because it aims to grow many crops in a land plot in order to sell massively and sometimes export to wealthy nations like the United States. It contradicts our Indigenous principle of only taking what you need from nature, because everything grown under agriculture is meant to be taken and sold" (Fresh Banana Leaves p. 25)

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What values did we identify in our literature review?

## **RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH ALL LIVING BEINGS**

Listening + reacting to plant and animal needs as well

## **ABUNDANCE + GENEROSITY**

Knowledge + recognition of vast natural resources, reproduction, and ease of distribution

“Each spring,  
before  
breaking  
ground with  
the hoe or  
planting the  
first seed, we  
ask permission  
from the  
Spirit of the  
Land and make  
offerings of  
gratitude.”  
(Farming While  
Black p. 53)

## **SEARCH FOR BALANCE**

Food is our link to emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental wellbeing

“The trees,  
especially, we  
recognize as  
our teachers.”  
(Braiding  
Sweetgrass  
p.18)

# WHO WE INTERVIEWED

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**JUAN CARLOS AND ROBERT**

from Sobremesa Farm  
[sobremesafarm.com](http://sobremesafarm.com)



**JOYCE AND VIVIAN**

from The Elephant Gardens  
[theelephantgardens.net](http://theelephantgardens.net)



**NIC AND MARIE**

from Outlier Farmstead  
[outlierfarmstead.square.site](http://outlierfarmstead.square.site)



**ANDRÉ**

Independent grower,  
often found at Hilltop  
Gardens & IU landscaping





"My philosophy is grow for me and give to my neighbors."

- André

## OUTLIER FARMSTEAD

"...We collaboratively manage the farm, we've been farming for four years... I myself, as a botanist, that means different things at different times of the year... my interest in botany integrates into our practices on the farm."

- Nic

"We both farmed ... in Northwest Indiana for a couple of years before ultimately moving here. And I went to school at IU for sustainable food systems science... But now I work with the sustainable food system science group."

- Marie



## SOBREMESA

"I really was aiming toward this idea of us being a gay couple, and here we are involved in farming...its unusual for gay men to be involved in a project like what we are doing."

- Robert

"We haven't been really loud about what we believe or what don't believe. We just provide food, we hope it is high quality food. And food, there is no prejudice because you are white, you are gay, you are black, you have to eat, everybody has to eat. If you don't you die."

"I found out recently that my great great grandfather was a farmer so and I didn't know that, but my grandmother from my moms side she grew up, because yeah, her grandpa and father were both farmers. So since I was a child I saw her growing plants, food, having animals that she loved. So when we started farming, all those memories came back. I feel like a child again and it was really, and still is, a nice thing."

- Juan Carlos

## THE ELEPHANT GARDENS

"We're a family owned and operated, black owned, female owned, urban farm. And we call ourselves the elephant gardens... elephants are herbivores, and they are fiercely loyal to their community, and very protective of their children."

- Vivian

"Our goal with Elephant Gardens is to try to alleviate some of the ongoing health issues in our area that are directly associated with what people eat."

- Joyce



# WHO ARE YOU?

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This is a space for you to reflect on who you are in your local growing community.

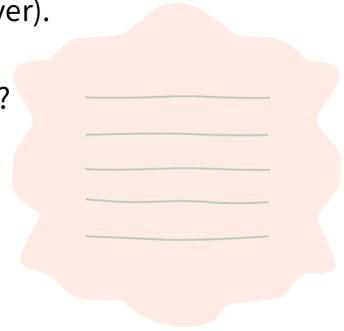
This can include people (farmers markets, church groups, neighborhood exchanges) and other living beings. Do you interact with neighboring squirrels? A herd of deer? Aphids?

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Think of the space where you grow, and use the grid and space below to sketch your surroundings.

You can think BIG (are you in a town? a state?) or small (a neighboring rabbits nest, a patch of clover).

Who is around you (animal, plant, human)?



# VALUES & LEARNING

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How we define ourselves is often shaped by what we define as important. To better understand what drove the goals of our interviewee's projects, we asked:

What values does your farm uphold? How do these values reflect in your farm's business and social practices?  
How did these values develop?

"The first thing you need, love, because sometimes people think gardening is fun. It is not fun; you need to have compassion and love."

- André




"It's very important for us to demonstrate to our community the importance of agrobusiness and entrepreneurial aspects of urban farms..."

- Vivian

"I think we were both more pacifists when it came to the idea of killing other beings[...] They all have their value, and it's just you have to know what are you going to value. Are they just there for you to eat? Uh, okay certainly, that's one approach, but wasn't for us."

- Robert



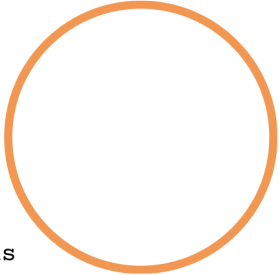


"We are not trying to turn everybody into vegetarian, but we're just trying to give the option that eating locally grown, organic food would be a better choice for you."

- Joyce

"Am I acting like a 23 year old...what does that mean?...Ultimately, it's always negated in my head because...how many other 23 year olds can say like, what they do is so fulfilling?"

- Marie



"That was definitely an inspiration [...] hearing all of these claims about doing good for the ecosystem - native ecosystems - trying to find out how that could actually be true, investigating that."

- Nic

"Farming per se is a summary of many many things, it isn't just about soil and water, but also observation, listening...If you don't listen properly, if you aren't in the present...you have to be all the time present."

- Juan-Carlos





# WHAT ARE MY VALUES?

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How do you decide what values guide you?

1. Imagine a moment (or two or three) where you deeply enjoyed your work.
2. Now, imagine an entire **Perfect Day**, a day that leaves you feeling inspired and satisfied. Write out what this looks like from sun up to sun down. Be as specific as possible, noting sensations, emotions, activities.
  - o Are you alone? With certain people? With a big group?
  - o Where are you? Slowly sipping tea on a porch? Under gentle spring sun?
  - o What are you doing? Almost nothing, and enjoying it? Watching bugs and birds? Getting a whole row of carrots in?
3. Look through your **Perfect Day**, and see if you can identify some themes (a recurring place or person, a sensation, a speed of life etc.)
4. Try to distill these themes into 4-5 key values (eg. slowness, company, time spent in nature, sharing results). hint: Google "core values list" for some examples"

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Adapted from The Tending Year's "Three keys to abundance" <https://thetendingyear.com/1-2-three-keys-to-abundance/>





# THE PAST & LEGACY

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To address food inequity at its root, we must understand the histories that brought us to this point - both as a society and as individual lineages. In the United States, many of our current social problems stem from colonization.

## **What is colonization?**

*Expansion and control over people and territories with the goal of accumulating money and power*

An impactful wave of European colonization began in the 13th and 14th centuries, expanding across the globe to grow crops like wheat and sugarcane, which could be sold for high profit.

## **What is settler colonialism?**

*Expansion and control with the goal of replacing Indigenous (original) populations and their cultures with a new population of settlers.*

Settler colonialism used genocide and violence to displace Indigenous populations and eliminate cultural diversity, allowing money-centered growing practices to dominate. Capital-driven farming has historically sacrificed the wellbeing of Black and Indigenous\* for the wealth of white farmers.

\*including Latinx farm labor which is often predominantly Indigenous

Across our interviewees, we found that histories of inequity based on Black, Latinx and queer identities within a predominantly white, cis-hetero male farming industry was a catalyst for designing community-centered growing practices.

"My best childhood memories are going to visit farms in Illinois, being around those animals...It was a whole different world...I thought, if I could just have chickens, that would be really cool, but it took me until almost about age 40.."

- Robert

"I want us to return back to the Earth, back to our roots both literally and figuratively and to reverse some of the [...] damage that has been done through the whole enemy of slavery."

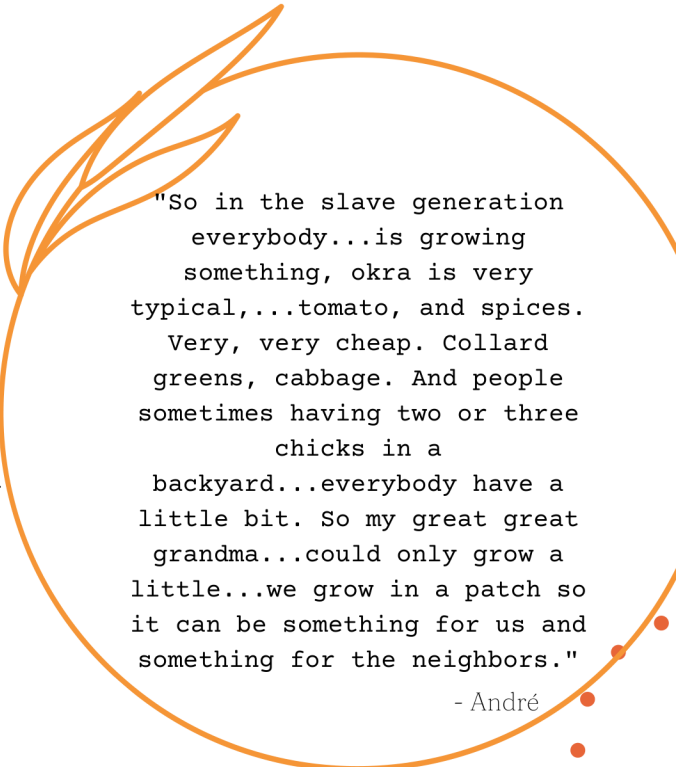
- Vivian

"Since I was a child I saw [my grandmother] growing plants, food, animals, and she loved it. So when we started farming, all those memories cam back and i felt like a child again."

- Juan-Carlos

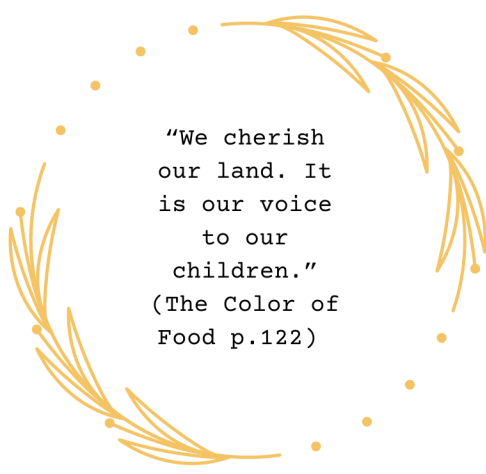
"...My aunts worked in Northwest Indiana, like tomato farms, and strawberry farms, harvesting...I thought that was cool. To kind of have that history and hear about...my mom's family's from Mexico, and this system is built on Mexican and Central American Immigrant labor. I always wondered if like my family had kind of partaken...and to think about...in a legacy sense, like, just building upon that through generational time. "

- Nic



"...urban growers, you just kind of inherit almost a social mandate...most of the growers I know are involved in food sovereignty, food justice, food access, food security issues, regardless of color, but if you're black or Hispanic, that's pretty much something you inherit. Especially if you're in a food desert area, as we are the grocery stores that are around us.

- Joyce



"We cherish our land. It is our voice to our children."  
(The Color of Food p.122)

"So in the slave generation everybody...is growing something, okra is very typical,...tomato, and spices. Very, very cheap. Collard greens, cabbage. And people sometimes having two or three chicks in a backyard...everybody have a little bit. So my great great grandma...could only grow a little...we grow in a patch so it can be something for us and something for the neighbors."

- André

"I grew up in a very urban setting...it's not in my background at all to garden or even like cooking wasn't really a big thing...That was something I started to do more when I got older, I could go other places."

- Marie

# WHAT IS MY FOUNDATION?

Think about your own history, both within your lifetime and your lineage. What role has colonization, and the beliefs behind it (expansion, money, competition, independence) played in how you were taught to think? Are there places where you'd like to change your way of thinking? What would that look like?

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"In order for us to be healthier people, it's important to know who we are and where we come from and what's unique about our culture and how we lived. That uniqueness is here, but we gotta revitalize it – especially African Americans and Native Americans and Hispanics who have walked away from their world into someone else's world and forgot where they came from. Then the children don't know where they've come from. There's no storytelling. There's no pride in good things like food. Food is a good thing to have pride in." (The Color of Food p. 122)

# COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

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Community can be defined in many ways, and can include people, but also other living things. To understand how our interviewees defined community, we asked:

How do you embrace and foster a relationship between your project and your community? Who do you see as your community?

"From the beginning, our goal was to bring people to the farm. Any kind of people...we wanted people to come, to establish a 1:1 relationship..it's an opportunity for us to teach them all the ways to approach food, not just a simple item to put in your stomach and that's it."

- Juan Carlos

"I think it's really cool to be able to.. work with plants...in a way where you can get to know them, you know, as friends...like, oh, we know, we know, cabbage. And we're good friends of cabbage, we know all about cabbage. And we can..work with cabbage, to be able to, like make a living partially off of that and like, share it with other people that eat it."

- Nic



"We were both very dedicated to being involved in a community of people, and we didn't need that to be a gay community, we wanted that to be a diverse community, so that you are exposing others to you, and others to us, so that we all had something to learn from each other."

- Robert







"My grandma and grandfather, so we, in Brazil, we have a very tiny space so grow a little bit of everything. But a lot of people, a neighbor for example, have a big space and no grow nothing. And all the time coming to my grandma saying "oh give me one tomato" or "give me one pepper" and my grandma gave. So one time I have a conversation with my grandma and say 'Now I'm thinking we need to teach this neighbor how to grow something because he has more space and no grow nothing.' So we save the seeds and we have a conversation with the neighbor, and so started growing something at the neighbor's house. So this community started looking, everybody got enthusiasm for starting growing stuff. So this guy coming to the garden: cause my grandma say, if you like it you need to learn to grow your own food."

"So we started and a little of the other neighbors, everybody see the progress of the other one so I keep it, have a little soil, so little by little. So the community that I am talking about here in the United States...I ask myself all the time what is the community garden people are talking about. Cause the place that I am coming from, community garden is very very powerful. When you open your mouth and say COMMUNITY GARDEN. I say this because in the community garden everybody help each other."

- André

"I am not a religious person but, being in the action with life and death too, and every time I learn more and more about all the complexity, all the systems, you know, the bacteria, that everything is connected, nothing is totally independent. So that makes me feel in awe... "

- Juan Carlos

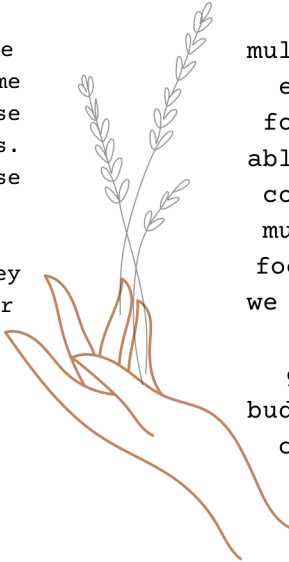


"...even though we are for profit. We try to keep our prices lower than what you're going to find at the grocery store. Plus we also accept snap, WIC, Fresh Books, senior vouchers, all the things that will help our community be able to buy healthier food."

- Joyce

"We have a project where we take our mobile farm stand to four senior living facilities that are in our general area of where our garden is we go every other Tuesday, take our farm stand set up on their parking lot. And then this enables the residents to come down and purchase fresh vegetables. They also can use their SNAP and they use their fresh books, they use their senior vouchers etc."

- Joyce



"Like it feels like, you know, our contributions really mean something and the work really means something outside of just like making money for someone else, you know."

- Marie

"The beech tree over there...is my favorite tree because the energy reminds me of something very powerful. So I hug this tree, Have a conversation with it. [...] All the time that I am working, I feel...somebody is following...I feel this in my body, but I am not afraid because I feel that this is good energy."

- André

"...we teach and grow multiple ways in the urban environment because we found that we need to be able to demonstrate to our community that there are multiple ways of growing food in urban reality. So we have our buddy buckets, which is container growing. We call them buddy buckets because it's companion planting..."

- Vivian

"There's nothing like visiting someone else's farm or having someone that farms visit your farm[...] that turns out to be the best way to learn about farming."

- Nic

# HOW DO WE INTERSECT?

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What does community mean for you?

Is it a group of people you see every day? A group unified by shared goals? People you know online?

Draw a picture of one of your communities. Write below: What are some ways you define community?

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# RESILIENCE THROUGH CONFLICT

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To go against the status quo and develop alternative models can mean being at odds with dominant frameworks. We asked our interviewees what conflicts they faced, and how they had responded.

"I came from a period of time being gay and growing where I learned that my best approach...was more about what i did than what I said...I don't try to hide, but what I want is for people to have a good impression about who I am as a doer and member of the community."

- Robert

"We want to rid the community of food pantries. We are often in meetings where [...] discussions on how [to] have better food pantries and we are often literally the elephant in the room saying, excuse me, a food pantry is emblematic, that we're not solving the problem. It is not necessarily a solution-based, sustainable practice to have food pantries. Our goal is not to give people a better food pantry, our goal is to alleviate the need for food pantries."

- Vivian

"We've been battling like crazy, and still are, cause all of these poverty pimps that exist in the grant world [...] get the money and they have this Reagan trickle down mentality [...] and they like to fund their white businesses."

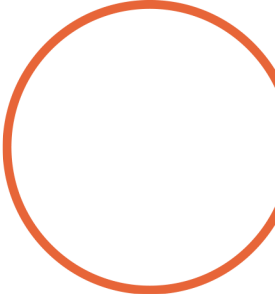
- Vivian

"You have to adapt all the time."

- Marie

"People...say things without thinking...sometimes prejudice...and you have to be understanding, sometimes they're older, and it's a moment for you to confront that, or take that advantage and teach them something without confronting them, and sometimes that is more effective."

- Juan Carlos



"...this house we've lived in since 1970 and...this community has gone through a lot of changes...the closing down of the lion's share of all our anchor schools...major grocery stores have also abandoned the community...those realities set the backdrop for the work that we do."

- Vivian

"When we first started we were very dogmatic about a lot of things [...] we subscribed to certain philosophies, like 'we're never gonna spray our plants,' and farmings joys have been this systemic degradation of that dogmatism."

- Nic

"What we've recognized a long time ago is that we're literally battling against an entire system. Whether you're talking about the fast food system, the pharmaceutical system, all of these systems, the big-ag corporate system, which are profit driven organizations that are not really looking at the health and well being of the human being...a David and Goliath type reality."

- Vivian

"I say if people paid more attention to what needs to get done and basically the soil is better soil and the people come and put your hands in the dirt and learn, I think it could change a little bit if people could start focusing this way. But if everything is ready for you, I don't expect anything."

- André



# HOW DO I ADAPT?

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In the book "Healing Resistance" by Kazu Haga, the author identifies 4 main kinds of conflict:

**Pathway Conflict** – We have the same goals, but different ways of reaching them that feel in competition

*Solution: Identify commonalities, aim to emphasize shared interests, not difference.*

**Mutually Exclusive Conflict** – We think we want the same thing, but have different reasons/definitions/values/ways of going about it

*Solution: Conversation to determine explicit goals and perspectives, find common ground*

**Distributive Conflict** – We operate in fear of scarcity (not enough time, grants, ideas), which pushes us to rush, hoard, limit.

*Solution: How can we redistribute what we DO have? How can we look at what we have in new ways?*

**Values Conflict** – We believe that our sense of self is being challenged, because we tie it closely to a particular value.

*Solution: Curiosity and dialogue to find what is the root of the fear that is felt.*





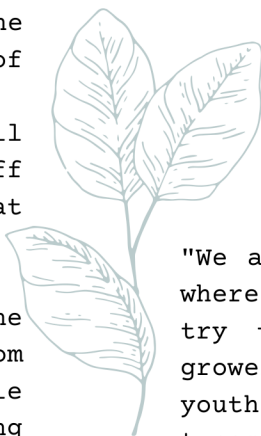


# BUILDING OUR FUTURE

While the growers we interviewed did talk about agricultural methods of sustainability, they also all emphasized the importance of **social sustainability**, seeing both education and a general sense of satisfaction and fulfillment as key components of future goals.

"Working towards the goal of eventually having a well trained staff of youth that can essentially run the garden from seed to table [...] growing growers."

- Vivian



"We also have a 4-H program, where on the youth side, we try to, as she said, grow growers, starting with the youth, showing them various types of gardening, such as in ground, raised beds, tunnel, etcetera."

- Joyce

"So Much of that fulfillment is working with People's Market to get our food to people that would not normally have local, or access to local, food. I think it is so lame to claim for a farm to like claim that they're building community and yet they sell to like the top 10% of wealthy people in an area that can afford the premium price of local food."

- Nic

"It's about appreciating what the soil gave for you. You need to give something back. Okay, that's what I believe. But...for the community garden, what I am looking for is people coming along and taking care of your place, cleaning, putting leaves covering your soil, having good relationships with your soil... The beginning, I try fixing, having a conversation with people. But one thing, sometimes people look at you,...you intimidate somebody because you know a lot."

- André

"It's cool when you know, like things break in your house, and you have power to fix it. That is really cool. Just knowing how to do certain things, and being you know, a bit more, just being so much more capable, I think, than we were, you know, three, four years ago."

- Marie

"A farm can be its own unique ecological system that is outside of the criteria of natural areas. How can we least offensively precede with farming to make sure we have a complex late successional ecosystem?"

-Nic

"We still experience stress through farming, but overall having that sense of being present, and being this your big office, working outside, breathing here, and the animals, smelling, tasting what you're growing. There is no words for this. It is actually a privilege, I will say, to be able to have this."

...sometimes we try to teach people about this style of life and some people don't get it.

And so...we try bringing to schools. You feel that stress coming, because the teachers, they have to be on a schedule... My goal is hopefully while they are here they can really see things in a different way and take that home, but I know it's tricky because it's not a choice. They are a part of a system that is oppressing them."

- Juan Carlos

"I don't think small - I think big, but do small, building the big."

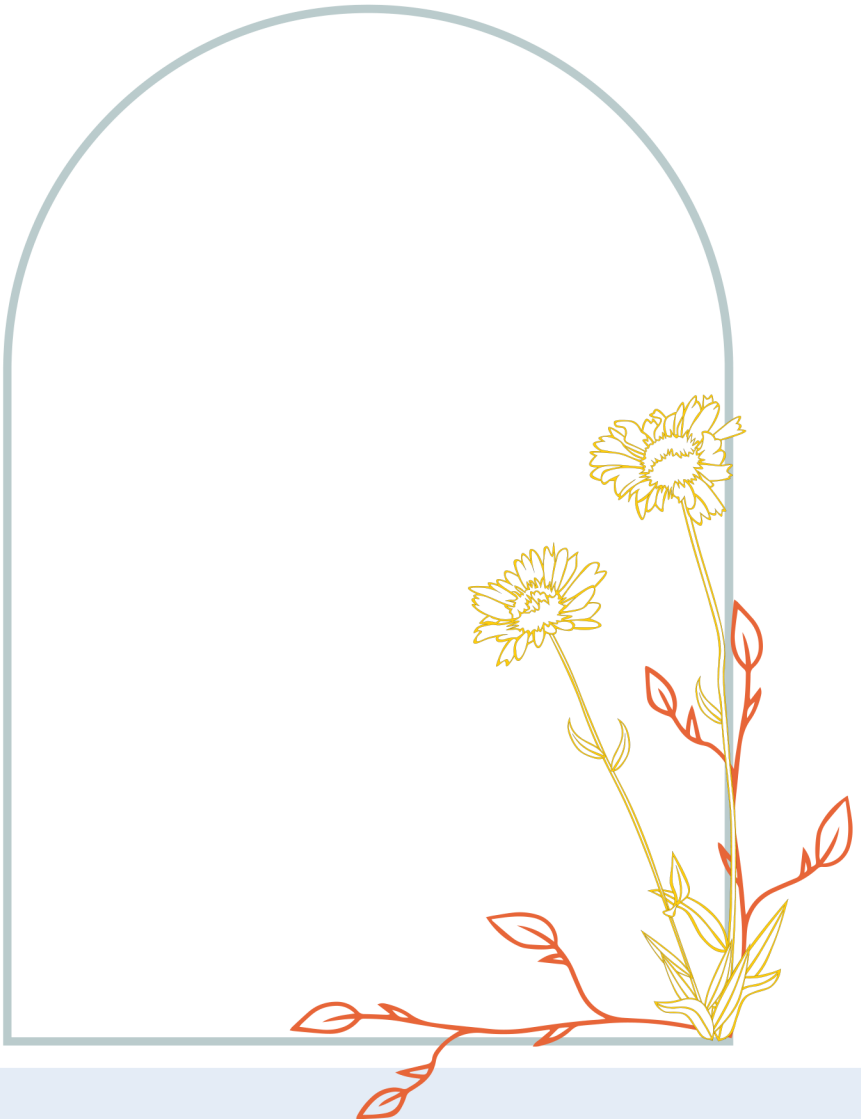
- André



# HOW DO I GROW?

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Look back at your values, foundation, and community activities. How might these roots of who you are shape the direction you want to go? Use this space to draw a version of your project, 10 years in the future.





# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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Want to immerse yourself further? These are some really good reads!



## IN-DEPTH RESEARCH QUESTIONS

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/12K5i3g\\_PIWjmQUpXtF1VRotAY3V2G8NpCxmuR9v7Z5E/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/12K5i3g_PIWjmQUpXtF1VRotAY3V2G8NpCxmuR9v7Z5E/edit)

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"My favorite thing...is the...Boolean operator on Google, where you type at the end of your search site :edu. So you can limit your search to just like University published, stuff like that. It's been indispensable for us."

- Nic

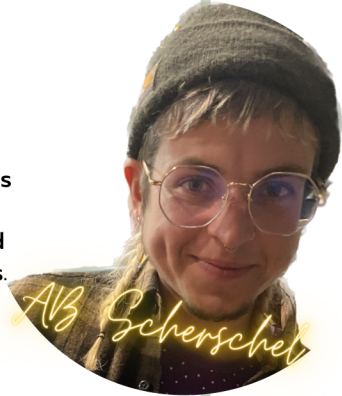


# Research Team



Undergraduate in Parks, Recreation, and the Outdoors, I am a student from Nashville, TN studying here in Indiana. I had a family garden growing up and have an ongoing tattoo of my favorite fruits from that garden. I love cooking with fresh and local ingredients and making up recipes as I go. I wish to learn more about the practices of other cultures and groups so that I am able to respect and acknowledge their knowledge, teachings, and practices.

A white non-binary creature of the diaspora, an avid grower, food justice activist, and multimedia artist guided by biology, herbalism, and anthropology. I grew up with many allergies in a small Indiana town. Failed by Western health systems, I began to realize we are our surroundings and we are out of balance. I continue to seek deeper answers as I find that organizations rooted in capitalism hide violences behind their processes. I hope to revel in an abundant access to knowledge as collaborating parts of nature, seeking grounding and a cyclical relation to being.



Anthropologist, plant nerd, and food lover, I am curious about how our bodies and experiences are shaped by deep history. Growing up in Mexico and the US, I've seen how foodways can carry ancestral memories, knowledge and values into new contexts, often challenging dominant oppressive structures. By working with community knowledge keepers, I seek to meld academic research and community interests to create impactful social change.





**THANK  
YOU**

The Healing Garden  
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