

WASHINGTON

gardener

the magazine for gardening enthusiasts in the Mid-Atlantic region

**Meet Bonnetta Adeeb
of Ujamaa Seeds**

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Bonnetta Adeeb

Environmental Justice Leader

By Dorvall Bedford

Bonnetta Adeeb is bringing seeds back to marginalized communities. Originally from California, she relocated to Maryland to be near family and found a house in Prince George’s County where her children could run wild in the fields like she did when she was young.

Adeeb is now president of STEAM ONWARD (<https://steamonward.org/>) and the Ujamaa Cooperative Farming Alliance (UCFA, ujamaafarms.com/), organizations dedicated to aiding minority groups. Her project UJAMAA SEEDS is a fundraising effort by the UCFA to provide diversity in farming and bridge the gap between prospective growers and seed companies. They “are committed to providing increased opportunities and support for growers from historically marginalized communities.”

Adeeb serves with the National Cooperative Gardens Commission and advises committees for state and national elected offices.

What drew you into the seed industry and why did you start the UJAMAA SEEDS?

My connection to agriculture is that my family’s been farming in the United States since 1710, before it was actually the United States. I was taught by my family that farmers were really smart. They knew botany, biology, animal husbandry, the soil, and chemistry. I grew up in a family that had tremendous respect for agriculture. I also come from a long line of minister—religious leaders—and food was always part of the ministry that I grew up in. They were able to donate and support

people in need in their community and make a good living.

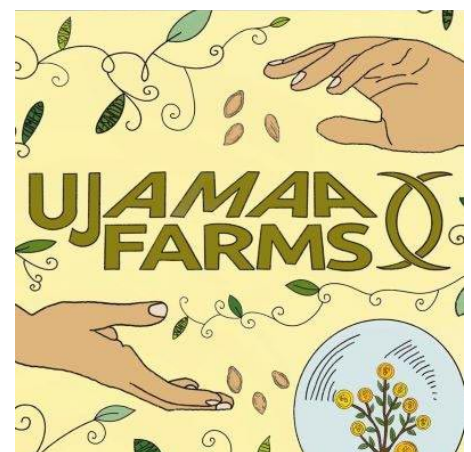
In the middle of the pandemic, STEAM ONWARD began to organize BIPOC growers in the region to support the installation of gardens in the homes of families or at churches. We had college-aged and some high school kids go into communities and set up emergency gardens, but to train them, we needed help. We went to the local farming community and began to solicit support from local BIPOC growers. Then we realized, from their work with our youth programs, that they had needs, too. That’s when we began the development of the Ujamaa Cooperative Farming Alliance. We started seed farming to supply culturally important seeds that were hard to come by to minority groups. That led to the opportunity to start a seed company called UJAMAA SEEDS.

Where did the name “Ujamaa” come from?

The name is from Kwanzaa and it’s a Swahili word that means “cooperative economics.” The term came from Julius Nyerere’s work to help African communities become economically self-sufficient. It has gained popularity in the United States in the last 50 years because of the celebration of Kwanzaa. As a principle, it can help us rebuild communities that were displaced due to the slave trade and address other atrocities faced by communities of color.

What do you grow in your own home garden?

My yard is a little bit different from other people’s yards. My own garden



is actually a perennial garden that's made up of things that reproduce. I have a lot of herbs, but in addition to that, I grow perennial onions, a lot of alliums, artichoke, melon, and a whole bunch of different kinds of greens.

What plants do you recommend for beginner gardeners to grow here?

There are a few plants I recommend that people start with that don't require really good soil or a lot of water. I suggest black-eyed peas and greens, such as collards and turnips. People would probably want to grow corn. I think corn is a little bit difficult because it could be knocked over by the wind, but there's nothing like eating a sweet ear of corn right off the stalk.

How diverse, or not diverse, would you say the seed industry is?

Not very diverse. People basically eat broccoli, some lettuce, and maybe zucchini. When you go into a restaurant, you just see a few things. There might be some carrots. There are very few vegetables in regular rotation and there's not a diverse selection served in restaurants or grown in people's gardens.

Even in the African American community, you'll only see about 10 or 12 different things. And most African Americans have lost touch with the varieties that used to be available. For instance, on our website (<https://ujamaaseeds.com/>), you can see our ultracross collards. There are 21 different colors in that collection! Most people are saying, "I didn't know there were 21 different colors." Well, your grandmother probably did.

People in the past had access to all these beautiful greens. If you look at these greens, they're almost like flowers. They are such a pretty green. If you walk into a grocery store, you may only see one variety while our ancestors had grown more than 100 varieties in the past.

How does UJAMAA SEEDS help promote diversity in farming?

We're teaching biodiversity. With



UJAMAA SEEDS, we're doing demonstration farms all over the country where people are adapting our ultracross collards and our ultracross okra regionally. What we're hoping to do is build demand for these diverse plants. Eventually, we want people to be demanding from their grocery stores that they want more than one collard and more than one variety of chard, which comes in rainbow colors.

Do you think the UCFA is succeeding in its mission and farming has become more diverse?

Yes, we think we're introducing diversity back into the American diet and we're offering things that people will want to eat because they're culturally relevant. We think that will create a healthier community because we believe that a plant-based diet is a healthier diet. We're not saying that you have to

be a vegetarian, but we're saying that if the majority of the food you eat is plant-based, you will be healthier.

I also think our sales are doing very well and people are buying our products. And we're getting the word out through the attention we get.

What are your hopes for the future?

My dream is simple: I dream that when you walk down the street and look into people's yards, you see vegetables. I want to see growing edible plants become reinstated as what people do. I want to see that everybody has a garden.

I'm hoping that people reclaim their heritage around healing and food, and that people seek to develop their own varieties. I believe that just like how negativity is contagious, so can positivity. 🌱

Dorvall Bedford is a journalism major at the University of Maryland, College Park, and an intern this semester with *Washington Gardener*. He is a native of Frederick, MD.

Photos courtesy of Bonnetta Adeeb.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



The Urban Garden: 101 Ways to Grow Food and Beauty in the City

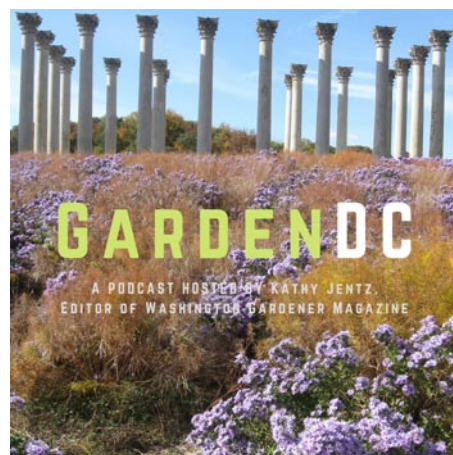
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