Black Farmers Purchasing Toolkit

A Farm-to-Institution Procurement Guide for Foodservice Operators
A Message from the R&DE Stanford Food Institute

As the founder of the R&DE Stanford Food Institute (SFI), my vision includes making Stanford Residential & Dining Enterprises’ (R&DE) commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging a central focus of all we do. Within this framework, we’re prioritizing supplier diversity across the Stanford Food Institute, R&DE Stanford Dining, Hospitality & Auxiliaries, and R&DE Finance & Administration.

The Equitable Harvest and Black Farmers Initiative is aligned with Stanford University’s vision to “strengthen communities on campus and beyond.” My vision for this initiative is to create a pathway for Black farmers to have a sustainable and equitable harvest and for it to remain vibrant for generations to come.

To achieve this, we have designed a comprehensive, long-term program to support Black farmers as part of R&DE Stanford Dining, Hospitality & Auxiliaries’ overarching racial equity plan and sustainable food program, One Plate, One Planet [2]. We are grateful for our long-time community partner, Farms To Grow, Inc., for working with us on this important initiative and are pleased to have this work supported with seed funds [4] from the Stanford Office of Community Engagement [5] in collaboration with the Doerr School of Sustainability’s Office of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion and funding from Residential & Dining Enterprises [6].

Our objective also extends to building a new model that other universities can embrace by freely sharing findings from our purchasing program and research initiative. This toolkit is a testament to that commitment.

Wherever Black farmers and producers sit in the food system, or the food industry, each of us has a responsibility to address the systemic racism Black producers have faced for generations. Upon exploring this toolkit, I trust you’ll recognize the positive opportunity we each possess in contributing to the revival of Black farmers in America.

Dr. Shirley Everett
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Senior Adviser to the Provost on Equity and Inclusion
Founder of Stanford Food Institute
# Table of Contents

- pg 1 ....... A Message from Dr. Shirley J. Everett, Stanford Food Institute
- pg 3 ....... Executive Summary
- pg 5 ....... Introduction
- pg 13 ....... Our Purpose
- pg 15 ....... The Voices & Stories of Black Farmers
  - Motivations for Farming
  - Agricultural Philosophies & Farming Practices
  - Barriers to Wholesale Markets
  - Experiences With Racism & Discrimination
  - Business Goals & Top Priorities Going Forward
- pg 27 ....... Recommended Steps for Food Service Providers
  - Building Trust-Based Relationships
  - Creating Sustainable Partnerships
  - A Transparent, Three-Pronged Approach
- pg 37 ....... Cultural Awareness
- pg 39 ....... A Closing Thought
- pg 41 ....... Appendices
Executive Summary

In 2020, the R&DE Stanford Food Institute and Farms To Grow, Inc partnered to increase R&DE Stanford Dining, Hospitality & Auxiliaries’ purchasing from Black farmers. Recognizing the scarcity of Black farmers among the suppliers of other large wholesale buyers, R&DE Stanford Food Institute and Farms To Grow, Inc produced two toolkits. The toolkit you’re currently reading aims to help foodservice operators purchase more food from Black farmers. The second is designed to assist Black farmers in gaining access to institutional foodservice distribution channels. This initiative seeks to reduce barriers for farmers aiming to enter wholesale markets.

Foodservice operators are encouraged to share these open-source toolkits with their distributors and any Black farmers from whom they intend to purchase.

In this toolkit, you’ll find an exploration of the history of Black farmers in the United States, emphasizing their resilience against systemic racism. The voices and experiences of 10 Black farmers are highlighted through insightful interviews.

Drawing from an additional 6 in-depth interviews with individuals across the supply chain, including foodservice operators, we bridge the gap between Black farmers and foodservice operators with recommended actions foodservice operators can take to build and maintain trust-based purchasing relationships with Black farmers.

It concludes with information on cultural awareness and the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion.
“Whatever your role in the foodservice system—whether you’re a sustainable dining director or a procurement director, on culinary leadership or on your institution’s diversity, equity, and inclusion team—this toolkit is for you. Everyone working in foodservice can be the spark of catalytic change.”

KEY FINDINGS:

• Historically and still today, Black farmers have faced structural racism and discrimination.

• This historical and present-day treatment has rightfully made many Black farmers distrustful of large institutions.

• Black farmers encounter numerous barriers to wholesale markets, including a lack of available information, unfair pricing, and extensive transportation and food safety requirements.

• Many Black farmers are eager to overcome barriers and collaborate with wholesale buyers and distributors, enabling them to access larger markets, grow their enterprises, and advance their families’ and communities’ health, wellness, and intergenerational wealth.

• Black farmers primarily use sustainable farming techniques and have for generations.

TOP RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOODSERVICE PROFESSIONALS:

• Build trust-based relationships: Get to know farmers as people first before talking about business. Learn about the barriers they may have faced and their future business goals to best advocate for them through supply chain distribution relationships.

• Connect with the Black farming community: Reach out to regional food hubs, aggregators, and community-based organizations (such as Farms To Grow, Inc) that have strong existing relationships with Black farmers. The Black Farmers Index [6] and National Black Growers Council [7] are good places to start.

• Create sustainable partnerships: Develop long-term, multi-year commitments with farmers that involve front-end planning, flexible menuing, and modified scale expectations.

• Empower small farms through innovative funding: Consider implementing models of funding that provide critically needed upfront capital, especially for small farms, to support farmers’ pre-harvest costs that include agreed-upon purchase volume and pricing.

• Strengthen procurement strategies through transparency: Apply a transparent, three-pronged strategic approach to procurement, in which the institutional buyer, the distributor, and the farmer engage in open, regular communication to build a strong relationship.
Introduction

In 1920, there were nearly one million Black farmers in the United States. Today, according to the most recent governmental data [8], there are just over 45,000.

This 95% decrease is a result of racism—past and present. The disappearance of Black farms is urgent and ongoing. All food system stakeholders have a responsibility to act now.
LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT:

Stanford sits on the ancestral land of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe. This land was and continues to be of great importance to the Ohlone people. Recognizing the centrality of land, history, and equity to sustainable food systems work, and consistent with our values of community and inclusion, we have a responsibility to acknowledge, honor, and make visible the University's relationship to Native peoples.
Following the Civil War, a majority of Black farm families at the time were forced to work under exploitative conditions as sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Federal programs and policies, while supposedly designed to open up farmland access, often excluded Black applicants. For example, the Homestead Act of 1862 gave U.S. citizens the opportunity to claim 160 acres of land for farming. But as a report [10] by McKinsey & Company notes, the Act was “passed prior to passage of the Fourteenth Amendment that recognized formerly enslaved people as citizens,” as well as the Civil Rights Act of 1866. Up to 1.6 million white families received free land, compared to only up to 5,500 Black families. In spite of this challenge, Black farmers were able to accumulate almost 20 million acres by 1920.

Since 1910, even families who owned their land have been stripped of their property, due to a host of discriminatory practices enforced by the government. Over the years, for instance, a certain governmental entity has systematically denied Black farmers loans and assistance. And as recently as 2022, it granted [11] direct loans to only 36% of Black farmers, compared to 72% of White farmers, and rejected applications from 16% of Black farmers versus just 4% of White farmers.

All these factors have led to a collective land loss that has been estimated to be at least 14 million acres, and that has affected 98% of Black farmers.

After the Civil War and the abolition of slavery in the U.S., many Black Americans sought to acquire land. As explained [9] in *The New Republic*:

“By 1890, about 20 percent of Black farm families owned their land, and by 1910 that figure had reached 25 percent. Even as White creditors cheated them, White planters worked them ragged, White politicians disenfranchised them, and White mobs targeted them with arsons and lynchings, over 425,000 Black families were able to save enough to purchase almost 20 million acres in the Jim Crow South.”
**BLACK FARMERS HAVE THE LOWEST APPROVAL RATE FOR DIRECT GOVERNMENT LOANS:**

An NPR analysis of government data looked at how many direct loans were accepted, rejected and withdrawn per racial group. Black farmers who applied for direct government loans in the 2022 fiscal year were approved at lower rates and rejected at higher rates than any other racial demographic.

<table>
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<th>Rejected</th>
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**Notes:** Race and ethnicity data was self-reported on loan applications. Data as of Jan. 10.

Source: NPR analysis of USDA data

Credit: Connie Hanzhang Jin/NPR
The Resilience of Black Farmers

Facing and overcoming discrimination at every level, Black farmers have innovated alternative models for building thriving enterprises. Since the end of the Civil War and accelerating in the 1960s, civil rights leaders and Black farmers organized networks of farmer cooperatives. Dr. Monica White’s expansive history of southern Black agricultural organizations, *Freedom Farmers* [12], illuminates how initiatives such as the Freedom Farm Cooperative grew to over 600 acres by the early 1970s and supported a generation of Black farmers in the Mississippi Delta. It also explores the 1967 roots of today’s robust Federation of Southern Cooperatives, and their influence on recent initiatives founded in urban areas beyond the South, including the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network.

Black farmers have also acted collectively to reclaim land and rights through policy. In 1997, a group of 400 Black farmers sued a governmental agency on the grounds that it had discriminated against them—and won [13]. The case, called Pigford v. Glickman, was settled in 1999, with $1 billion allocated to tens of thousands of farmers. However, for most of the 20,000 farmers receiving payment, this only amounted to $50,000 each—barely enough to buy a new tractor, as one example. Additionally, tens of thousands more farmers were not informed of the lawsuit in time to apply for the money, or were delayed by confusing paperwork and deadlines, and were eventually told they filed too late. In light of these complications with the Pigford case, Congress allotted another $1.2 billion for Black farmers in 2010, but, as before, settlements have largely been capped to $50,000 per farmer, and a number of farmers have yet to receive payment.

The Emergency Relief for Farmers of Color Act of 2021 aimed to provide $4 billion in loan forgiveness to Black farmers and other farmers of color. But after white farmers alleged that the program’s race-specific language discriminated against them, new legislation—the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022—revised this stipulation, replacing it with race-neutral language. Now, this money may no longer find its way to Black farmers, many of whom were instrumental to getting a debt-relief program in the first place. In early 2023, seven U.S. Senators, led by Cory Booker, reintroduced [14] the Justice for Black Farmers Act. Representative Alma Adams reintroduced the same bill in the House, with seventeen co-sponsors. Over one hundred organizations [15] have endorsed these acts.

Despite signs of progress, more success on the policy front is needed to fully leverage the federal government’s role in supporting Black farmers. Historically, when the government makes promises to Black farmers, it breaks them. In the meantime, institutions need not wait, though they must understand why this history has rightfully made many Black farmers distrustful of large institutions.
An Incalculable Economic Loss

As *The Guardian* reports [16], Black farmers “make less than $40,000 annually, compared with over $190,000 by white farmers.” The decrease in Black farmers from almost 1 million in 1920 to 45,508 in 2017 is far steeper than for farmers [17] of other races.

But these data points, which focus on farmers as individuals, do not begin to capture the effects of systemic racism on Black communities as a whole. Historically, farmers formed the bedrock of many Black communities. The first- and second-generation farmers who gained access to land following the Civil War achieved crucial steps toward freedom and economic independence through land acquisition. Land helped Black communities raise families; develop the infrastructure of churches, schools, businesses, and entertainment; and establish sustainable livelihoods.

Black farmers were land owners and donated land for the development of Black towns. Because of the necessity of safe places to live, these all-Black enclaves were foundational to the development of thriving, interconnected communities—an entire social fabric of schools, businesses, and civic associations. Yet, within all the development, the basic belief that Black people were undeserving of loans meant that communities dealt with all forms of discrimination, especially the loss of land they had worked to acquire after the Civil War.

A study in *The New Republic* calculates [9] that the land loss experienced by Black farmers between 1920 and 1997 is equivalent, in today’s dollars, to $326 billion. Moreover, the authors of this study state that this is a low estimate, as it does not account for other investments Black families could have made—for example, in their children’s education.

And as for the intangibles: Black farmers’ “diminished political rights, their lost self-determination and autonomy, their lost dreams, hopes, aspirations, and way of life,” as *The New Republic* authors write? “No calculation,” these authors continue, “could ever account for these things.”
Paul Gaskin
Blue Ridge Ranch, Guinda, CA
Repairing the Narrative

This history has shaped a narrative within Black communities, where farming is often linked to unfair treatment. According to one farmer interviewed, African Americans, particularly the youth, view farming as an extension of sharecropping and slavery. Consequently, engaging and inspiring younger generations to pursue agriculture as a career presents a significant challenge for Black farmers.

“People don’t see farming as a noble institution,” he said. “They don’t see agriculture as a space of justice and equity. They see it as one of the remnants of slavery and institutionalized racism.” Because of a governmental agency’s long-standing discrimination against Black farmers, it has even been called “the last plantation. [18]”

Our goals for this toolkit are to:

- Break down the barriers Black farmers have faced in entering wholesale markets.
- Outline steps that institutions, including but not limited to colleges and universities, can take to remove these barriers and change industry standards.
- Equip procurement managers and foodservice leaders in various settings to purchase from Black farmers in equitable, culturally responsive ways, thereby expanding their network of supplier relationships.
- Help Black farmers be able to build the intergenerational wealth they were denied for so long.
Our Purpose

R&DE Stanford Dining, Hospitality & Auxiliaries is a division of Residential & Dining Enterprises, a self-operated foodservice department, serving 25,000 meals daily in over 100 locations across three campuses, and procuring 11.4 million pounds of food each year. We aim to use our purchasing power to support racial equity and help reverse Black farmers’ disappearance.

The findings cited in this toolkit are based on our own learnings from the purchasing program and research initiative we have set up here at Stanford in partnership with Oakland-based community organization Farms To Grow, Inc. We hope that, by freely sharing these findings, other institutions—namely fellow colleges and universities, K-12 schools, hospitals, prisons, and corporate dining programs, as well as other foodservice companies (both contract and self-operated) at large—can learn from and adapt the models that work at Stanford, and thus help to support Black farmers across the nation.

Ultimately, we hope for every volume foodservice purchasing department to think of purchasing from Black producers in the same way they think about local purchasing: a new norm within the foodservice industry. We hope they use the power of their institutional dollars to reduce the disenfranchisement of Black farmers.
The Voices & Stories of Black Farmers

We interviewed 10 Black farmers: five based in California, and five from other states (Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, and New Jersey).

Nine of these farmers are male; one is female. Crucial to this purchasing program and research initiative was that we heard from the farmers directly, as a key goal of the toolkits is to center their perspectives and elevate their stories.

The interviews, based on community-based participatory research [19] principles and following an organic, conversational format, were led by Jared Klegar (Stanford B.A. ’24), accompanied by Elaine Smith (Farms To Grow, Inc Executive Director) and occasionally Diane Mavica (Stanford R&DE Associate Director of Vendor Management and Contracts). Each interview lasted about 1 to 2 hours.

The farmers shared insight on their:
1. Motivations for farming
2. Agricultural philosophies and farming practices
3. Barriers to wholesale markets
4. Experiences with racism and discrimination
5. Business goals and top priorities going forward
Motivations for Farming

When the farmers were asked to describe their motivations for farming, three themes emerged: family, community, and health and nutrition.
THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY:

All the farmers we interviewed cited family as a major motivating factor for both starting and continuing farming. Many learned how to farm from watching their parents or grandparents. Today, some work alongside their siblings, while others show their children the ropes, hoping the next generation will ultimately take over their operations.

With this sense of heritage—one farmer’s family has been involved with agriculture for eight generations—comes a unique connection to the land. But given the history of discrimination against Black farmers, it also sometimes means wrestling with complex familial pasts. Several farmers spoke about relatives who had been sharecroppers, working under unjust conditions. These farmers expressed how they try to honor their family’s agricultural traditions while acknowledging the inequitable social structures under which many of these traditions were born. In this way, farming can be “a process of healing ancestral trauma,” as one farmer, Ms. Tomia MacQueen, described it.

A COMMUNITY-CENTERED EFFORT:

Many interviewees said that they first established their farms because they wanted to give back to their communities. After the local grocery store in one farmer’s town closed down, he began growing food as a way to fight food insecurity within his community. And even among farmers who are interested in selling their products in wholesale markets, many stressed the importance of keeping some of their crops within their communities.

Another farmer noted that his community has been crucial in sustaining his business. After a fire destroyed sizable portions of his property—damages totaling hundreds of thousands of dollars—he received just $2,000 from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. In the absence of substantial outside help, he relied on the support of family members, neighbors, and fellow farmers in order for his farm to survive.

HEALTH & NUTRITION:

In particular, farmers emphasized their desire to provide their families and communities with healthier food options. “I did not like the simple fact that pesticides were in our food,” one farmer said. “I just felt that it was making us unsafe, and I always thought that it was making us have some of these health conditions within our Black community.”

For reasons along these lines, it has been important to many farmers that they provide their community members with access to fresh, locally grown food—and that they do so using sustainable practices.
A TRADITION OF SUSTAINABILITY:
One farmer’s mission, he said, is “to keep old traditions alive, old crops, African crops—keep that stuff going, like mustard greens, turnips, swiss chard, kale, seeded melons.” Many farmers spoke about the cultural significance of the crops they grow.

And to grow these crops, the farmers we interviewed use methods that attend to sustainability and conservation. Several also have farm animals, and discussed their advocacy for and methods of humane animal treatment. Many grow organic, which “may cost a little bit more,” a farmer explained, but is “worth it, because what we're putting in our bodies is good, and it's healthy for us, and it's helping us to live longer and have more productive lives.”

Moreover, they use the following techniques, which prioritize healthy soil, carbon sequestration, and the preservation of biodiversity, among other sustainable practices:
• No or low-till
• Crop rotation
• Diversified farming
• Managed and rotational grazing
• Cover crops
• Compost
• No synthetic pesticides, herbicides, or insecticides
• Pollinator protection
• Precision irrigation and drought-tolerant crops
• Water-conserving and water-draining soil mixes
• Hydroponics
• Reusable containers
• Mulching
• French drain systems
• Tractor repairs in designated areas to prevent oil leaking
• No waste

As one farmer put it, “I think it’s the only way that we continue to survive: that we’re employing these techniques.”

ROOTS IN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE:
These practices could be called “regenerative” or “climate-smart.” But as multiple farmers noted, they and their ancestors, as well as their Indigenous colleagues, had been utilizing so-called “regenerative” practices long before these buzzwords [20] caught on.

“What happens in academic institutions,” one farmer said, “is that they work very hard to codify the practices of the people on the ground. So when we talk about ‘climate-smart’ agriculture, what that word is really replacing is Indigenous practices.” The term, despite appearing to encapsulate
a new form of farming, in actuality describes “the way that we worked before colonization.”

Another farmer pointed to regenerative agriculture’s origins in the Global North and the movement’s frequent failures to credit the Indigenous knowledge on which it is built. He contrasted this with agroecology, another movement that recognizes agriculture as interconnected with politics, economics, and society. (You can read more on this distinction here. [21])

GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER:

Black farmers’ current practices also draw heavily from the groundbreaking work of agricultural scientist George Washington Carver.

Carver was born into slavery. Transcending mountainous societal barriers through determination, intelligence, and curiosity, he attended Iowa State University as the first Black student. While completing his bachelor’s and master’s degrees, his pioneering botanical innovations won national recognition. In 1896, the famed Black educator Booker T. Washington, then-president of the Tuskegee Institute, appointed Carver to head the school’s agriculture program.

Carver’s work paid close attention to diversification and crop rotation. He wanted, according to the Tuskegee Institute’s website [22], to direct Black farmers away from cotton, which often caused soil exhaustion, “to such soil-enhancing, protein-rich crops as soybeans and peanuts and to teach them self-sufficiency and conservation.” His lab created more than 300 different products from peanuts. Oftentimes, Carver would retrieve the broken beakers thrown out into the dumpsters at Auburn University to conduct his experiments.

Carver shared his research findings by circulating free, accessible bulletins, which “contained invaluable advice about improving soils using fixed nitrogen crops and growing low input crops.” Carver’s bulletins—and his ingenuity at large—are all too commonly overlooked by (White) historians. But his impact on sustainable agriculture, not to mention science as a whole, has been indelible, and some of the farmers we interviewed credited his innovative practices.

CERTIFICATIONS:

Of the growers we interviewed, most do not have sustainability certifications for their farms. Farmers expressed interest in these certifications, but some did not know the requirements to getting certified; some did know the requirements but were dissuaded by barriers with regard to paperwork and cost (fees for application, inspection, renewal, etc.); and others were unsure, given size requirements and the demands of the market, if their operation could reasonably run wholly organic, for instance.

One grower’s farm was certified organic, but he said he didn’t know if the certification was helping to improve his pricing.
Barriers to Wholesale Markets

The barriers farmers encountered can be classified into the following categories: lack of available information, unfair pricing, issues with transparency, and concerns relating to transportation, food safety, and scale requirements.
LACK OF AVAILABLE INFORMATION:
When it comes to wholesale markets specifically, farmers spoke about a general lack of information. Many were unaware of the option to sell, for example, to colleges and universities. Those who were aware did not know where to start or whom to contact. Without any inroads to institutions or distributors, it made more sense for these farmers to continue with community farming and to sell only in local markets.

UNFAIR PRICING:
Despite this widespread inaccessibility, some of the farmers we interviewed still were able to enter wholesale markets. There, however, they faced unfair treatment, particularly with regard to pricing.

One farmer struck a deal with a food broker to sell his red onions for $12 per box. But when the broker finally sent him the check, the price had suddenly changed—without any discussion or negotiation—to $5.80 per box. Because there were no measures of accountability in place to restrict this food broker’s power, the farmer had no recourse to challenge the new price. The experience dissuaded him from wanting to stay in wholesale.

This is not an uncommon experience. Another farmer noted: “Wholesale pricing markets never seem to hold true to what was promised.”

Furthermore, farmers noted a lack of transparency regarding not just selling prices, but also input costs: it has not always been clear what is a fair amount of money they should be expected to invest for resources like seeds and equipment.

ISSUES WITH TRANSPARENCY:
The farmer who was not given fair prices for his red onions observed: “African American farmers no longer trust the government after the treatment they have received.” And, after the treatment Black farmers have received from institutions and distributors, that distrust extends to them as well.

Farmers emphasized that it is critical to keep them informed in all business interactions. One farmer, who is currently working with a university in the South, noticed that there were “backroom conversations that [he] is not a part of.” Farmers expressed a willingness and need to be included in these discussions, in order to build trust and stay current on buyers’ demands.

TRANSPORTATION & FOOD SAFETY REQUIREMENTS:
About 18 years ago, one farmer said he tried selling to schools in his county. The main difficulty he encountered was transportation: Without the infrastructure to transport his crops from his rural farm to the urban areas where schools were located—at a minimum, a 1.5-hour journey—he was not able to secure the purchasing relationship.

In addition, many farmers were unaware of the extensive food safety practices required by institutions and distributors. If they did know about these requirements, oftentimes they were unsure about the costs involved.

THE PROBLEM OF SCALE:
Many farmers said selling to institutions like colleges and universities appeared inaccessible to them because these institutions tend to purchase crops at a high volume. Farmers did not know if it was financially viable for them to try to scale their operations to meet this demand, nor did they want to compromise the quality of their products or the sustainability of their practices to meet the minimum amount of what institutions want.
Experiences with Racism & Discrimination

The barriers to wholesale markets described above are intricately linked to farmers’ experiences with racism and discrimination. Racism creates obstacles that farmers must consistently face and overcome in order to continue farming.

Racial discrimination against Black farmers is the proverbial elephant in every room. Based on the findings of Pigford, just to name a few findings when it comes to U.S. agriculture, there is overwhelming evidence that discrimination against Black farmers is as endemic as the soil.

When asked if he had ever experienced racism in his line of work, one farmer, Mr. Jim Embry, said, “Every day. I mean, that kind of question is like, ‘Is the sun ever going to shine?’ The sun’s always shining. Even when the Earth turns, and we’re in night, the sun is shining.”
OVERT RACISM:

Another farmer told the following story:

I was in my junior year of college, and I came home one summer and I learned from one of my White farm buddies that he had just got a beginning farmer loan because he was from a farm family and he wanted to farm. So one particular day, my dad and I were at a governmental office, and I walked in the back to talk to the county executive director about a beginning farmer loan. This gentleman proceeded to tell me that I was a smart young man, and I was in college, and I should go pursue a job and use the good head on my shoulders and not get involved in farming. I felt a little slighted because my high school buddy had just told me he got a beginning farmer loan. I’m like, Why would you give so-and-so a farm loan and discourage me from trying to get a farm loan? That’s just not what I wanted.

I said, ‘I want a farm—it’s my family’s legacy, and I want a farm.’ So he proceeded to tell me, ‘Well, you know the farm is expensive, and your dad right now—he’s in debt and owes the government money.’ And I said, ‘Well, sir, that’s not what I came in here for. I didn’t come in here to ask you for a lecture on who, what, and why. I came in here to ask you for a beginning farmer loan for me. And it doesn’t seem like you are answering my question.’

So he proceeded to get a little frustrated with me. And he set back in his chair, and he pulled his center desk drawer out. And in that desk drawer he had a pistol. He looked down at that pistol, and he looked back up at me. He said, ‘I think we’re done with this conversation, son.’

That is a scar that I still bear, and I hope and pray that no other Black, Native American, or historically underserved kid would ever have to experience anything like that in life, because I, too, could have been a George Floyd, an Ahmaud Arbery, a Breonna Taylor, just in that local government office.

Many institutions, agencies, and individuals have inflicted this type of trauma upon Black farmers. This experience from a couple decades ago still speaks to the violence some Black farmers encounter today [23].

COVERT RACISM:

Farmers also shared experiences in which the racial discrimination they faced was more subtle, disguised enough that its perpetrators could rationalize it away. “Racism is a very tricky thing to codify from the outside,” one interviewee said. “As someone who experiences it, you can kind of see it. But then people can say, ‘Oh, that wasn’t racism, that was just such-and-such.’ There’s a lot of ways that people try to justify actions.”

Taken together, these stories undeniably lay bare the pervasive culture of racism that farmers have had to navigate.

Black farmers have been denied loans even with excellent credit scores, impressive work histories, and the highest credentials. They have been shut out of farmers’ markets. They have not been able to sell their products even when they have seen White farmers, with products of a similar quality, successfully sell theirs to the same buyers. They have been expected to pay for their land upfront, in cash. Government organizations have neglected to tell them about opportunities for grants and bridge loans.
Business Goals &
Top Priorities Going Forward

The farmers we interviewed all have ambitious goals they wish to achieve over the next 5 to 10 years. They hope to farm more of their land, sell their products to institutions, and gain access to more resources.
FARMING MORE LAND:

A large portion of the farmers currently farm less than one-third of the land they own. Without sufficient capital and demand, though, they said they cannot expand their operations. In the past, some had experienced difficulties getting rid of their products: they couldn’t find markets in which to sell them, and so distributed them to shelters and churches at no cost or found other ways to donate them. They didn’t see competitive prices as a viable option and simply didn’t want to let their crops go bad or to waste.

Going forward, many farmers said their goal is to sell all (or most, since some farmers noted they still wanted to donate food to their communities) of their products, and to do so at prices proportional to the quality of their food and the amount of labor they invest.

Then, their farms will be able to grow. One farmer, who recently became an approved supplier of R&DE Stanford Dining, Hospitality & Auxiliaries, was only farming about 20 percent of his acreage in 2022. Now, with Stanford lined up as a wholesale buyer in 2023, he is farming 70 percent of his land.

GETTING MORE RESOURCES:

To reach these goals, nearly every farmer stressed the importance of access to resources. Some need new equipment, others are looking to acquire crop insurance, and still, others would like to be able to hire full-time employees.

“Farmers need advocates,” as one interviewee put it. Another said, “The limit on what I can do is my resources currently.” They know how to farm; they just need the capital.

“Black farmers have shown perseverance in the face of innumerable obstacles. Still, it is hard at times not to be discouraged. “Sometimes, when doors are not open,” one farmer, Mr. Will Scott, said, “you refrain from opening the door anymore.”

Another said that, in light of the legacy of discrimination against Black farmers, a certain mindset can develop: “You stay in your area in which you are able to succeed and you try to move on from there. But you wouldn’t dare venture out into something if you thought it wasn’t available to you.”

When asked if he had any questions about supplying a university like Stanford, one farmer responded with three. “Is it real?” he asked. “The opportunities—are these things real?” And finally: “Is Stanford the only school that is looking at this as an opportunity to share with people?”

Our hope is that, by widely sharing this toolkit, we will soon be able to answer this question with a resounding no, and that there will be diverse opportunities for Black farmers to enter wholesale markets across the nation.
Recommended Steps for Foodservice Providers
LEARNING FROM PAST APPROACHES:

Many foodservice operators have expressed interest in purchasing from Black farmers. But—as gathered from the learnings of Stanford’s initiative thus far, as well as from interviews with key industry stakeholders—these operators run into roadblocks at the very beginning of the procurement process. It seems that foodservice leaders, even when motivated, can’t find Black farmers to buy from.

A food systems consultant who works closely with small, local farmers said that some foodservice professionals start by googling “Where are Black farmers?” and then performing cold outreach, which she described as “very ineffective.” She also spoke about foodservice operators who were “not knowledgeable about what the daily lived reality of small and regional farmers are”.

This section of the toolkits outlines strategies that can be more effective than past approaches.

CONNECTING WITH THE COMMUNITY:

Where Stanford has found the most success in connecting with Black farmers is by partnering with the organization Farms to Grow, Inc, which works closely with farmers: providing them with technical assistance, helping with grant writing, connecting them to distribution opportunities, and offering a multitude of other resources [24].

One farmer we interviewed mentioned that he had far less faith in politicians and government officials than he did in the directors and team of Farms To Grow, Inc. Indeed, the interviews we conducted with farmers for this toolkit were only possible because of the trust Farms To Grow, Inc had already established with those farmers.

Stanford’s relationship with Farms To Grow, Inc took time to develop and involved a number of long, deeply considered conversations. It is based on listening, open communication, and Stanford’s commitment to this initiative as a long-term, sustainable program.

Simply put, this toolkit—and this program—would not exist without Farms To Grow, Inc!

We are currently developing a database, to be hosted on Farms To Grow, Inc’s website in the future, including points of contact for farmers, community organizations, and foodservice operations. This database, we hope, will help to foster collaborations like the one between Stanford and Farms To Grow, Inc.

ESTABLISHING TRUST:

Any foodservice professional should be conscious of the distrust many Black farmers have of large institutions, and why there is good reason for this distrust, given the historical and present discrimination they are up against.

“If we have any issues,” said one farmer we interviewed, “it’s usually people from the outside.” It is crucial, therefore, that foodservice operators recognize this history and these sentiments, and adjust their behavior accordingly.

Building trust might mean traveling to visit growers on-site at their farms or having several preliminary conversations with them to get to know them as people first before trying to strike a deal. Foodservice operators should also have an understanding of the digital divide and note that some farmers may not be as familiar with certain forms of communication or technology (such as Zoom).
Creating Sustainable Partnerships

In addition to sharing the insights gained from Stanford’s own purchasing program, we interviewed six foodservice professionals. These professionals lead national and international organizations, hail from across the country (Arkansas, California, Illinois, Pennsylvania), and represent a broad array of perspectives within national distribution.

Our foodservice interviewees continually stressed that the current procurement system was designed for, and operates with, big corporate growers in mind—not small, local farmers.

“The traditional power dynamic of à la carte ordering,” one foodservice professional said, “does nothing to build farmer capacity.” Another interviewee pointed out that growers most commonly hold all the risk in the supply chain but don’t receive profits proportionate to that risk.

The following practices are meant to correct these power imbalances, mitigate risk and uncertainty on the grower’s end, and set up farmers for success.

LONG-TERM, MULTI-YEAR COMMITMENTS:

Without commitments that span at least a couple of years, foodservice interviewees said, it is difficult to develop a purchasing relationship built on trust. Additionally, this amount of time allows farmers to feel a sense of stability and for institutional buyers to engage in thorough, collaborative planning with growers.

One farmer we interviewed said that he had seen programs come into his community and offer money but that these programs were inadequate without a structure in place that kept supporting the community over time.

Finally, if or when these multi-year commitments end, it is important that farmers are in a better position than when they began. To ensure the commitment ends in this better place, farmers and buyers should maintain a consistent dialogue throughout the purchasing relationship. If, for instance, farmers have to ramp up production to meet demand, institutions and distributors should ensure that, by the end of the commitment, the farmers still have outlets that align with the amount they are producing.

MODELS OF FUNDING:

Stanford has developed a “forward pay” model, in which we provide much-needed cash flow to farmers during their times of peak expenses (planting, growing, harvesting, and distribution) to reduce the financial risks and pressures of waiting to be paid until they can deliver their products to campus. Specifically, Stanford has the flexibility to offer 50% advance payment. This model may not work for all farmers, some of whom may feel it resembles sharecropping. But it has worked for some Black farmers Stanford has purchased from, so if it is a tenable course of action for an institutional buyer, it should be provided as an option.

Other foodservice leaders have also offered capital to growers looking to begin selling wholesale. For example, the Common Market, a nonprofit regional wholesale food distributor, extends working capital loans to farmers with 0% interest and no fees. By incorporating these practices, institutions can help share risk across the supply chain more equitably.
FRONT-END PLANNING:

Setting clear expectations from the get-go is pivotal for any successful purchasing relationship. Institutional buyers should be upfront about what crops are needed, the terms of rejection and acceptance for products, and their anticipated timelines for distribution.

At the same time, buyers and distributors should be flexible when possible, and willing to adapt to working with different types of producers. Many farmers we interviewed stated that they could not sell wholesale in the past due to rigid distribution specifications. But with enough time and commitment, buyers, distributors, and farmers can work together to help farmers meet these specifications.

Everyone at the table should be forthright about their capabilities. Foodservice operators should be careful not to overcommit or overpromise regarding what they are able to buy. In addition, one foodservice professional observed that growers, on occasion, have either underestimated or overestimated how much they could produce because they didn’t want to be judged. But if institutional buyers and distributors lay out contingency plans for both parties to follow in the case of crop failures and have backup products in their order guides, then that might alleviate some pressure for farmers. If foodservice operators express to farmers that they know harvest issues are possible, all parties can be on the same page.

ONBOARDING AND FOOD SAFETY:

Foodservice professionals should be aware of the extensive onboarding and food safety process local farmers have to undergo to sell wholesale. These requirements are often difficult, expensive, and time-intensive and affect the time and capital farmers will need to enter wholesale markets. To comply with onboarding checklists, farmers may need to spend anywhere from $25,000–$50,000. (Our complementary toolkit designed for Black farmers, covers the requirements in more detail.)

It’s important to note that many institutions have long-term contracts with corporate distributors that have especially extensive requirements, sometimes exceeding federal regulations. For example, according to exemptions laid out in the Food Safety Modernization Act [25], farms that are small enough in size and revenue do not need to obtain third-party Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification to sell to an institution—but the distributor tied to the institution will still require it. (Furthermore, the industry standard in many regions of the U.S. is for a farmer to obtain GAP certification just once, and provide a letter upon request each year from their food safety consultant that they are still following the plan. Many corporate distributors, however, require small farms to pay for re-certification each year.) Distributors also often request that farmers have extremely expensive liability insurance policies, usually $2–10 million of coverage, when most small farmers carry a policy of $1 million in coverage—far more than enough for most foodservice arrangements.

But not only is change possible, it has precedent. Recently, some distributors have provided food safety scholarships and technical assistance to Black farmers. All institutions should do an extensive review of their distributors’ requirements. As the customers of distributors, they have more power than they realize to advocate for farmers, provide them with resources, and push to relax these distributors’ requirements.
MODIFIED SCALE EXPECTATIONS:

One of the biggest concerns expressed by the farmers we interviewed had to do with scale. Beginning farmers, in particular, were unsure whether they had the capital and labor to produce at a large enough volume. They also didn’t know if they could do so without straying from their sustainable practices and negatively impacting the land. Moreover, some farmers said they didn’t want to send all their food to wholesale markets and wanted to retain a portion of it for their community. These scenarios require a different approach than institutional buyers might typically take with a corporate supplier. But if buyers are committed to connecting Black farmers to distributors that work with smaller growers, and make clear to farmers that they would never expect any one farmer to be able to supply the entire institution, these issues with scale can be resolved.

Furthermore, there are benefits to a foodservice operation that has a diversity of suppliers at various scales, as opposed to just a few suppliers in large scales. Such diversification might help mitigate risks relating to harvest, especially in light of the growing impacts of climate change on agriculture. It also speaks to a “value chain” [26] approach, where relationships with producers have as much of a priority as the bottom line.

CONTRACTS:

All the above practices and conditions should be cataloged in writing for the purposes of transparency and accountability. That being said, some foodservice interviewees noted that certain farmers might find “hardcore contracts” intimidating or anxiety-inducing, especially those with unstable immigration statuses or poor prior experiences with them. Other farmers might be hesitant to jump into contract growing because they fear falling short on their end of the agreement. One way to alleviate these concerns is for institutional buyers to start small with a few products, build trust by being good customers and offering good payment terms, and then gradually formalize the purchasing relationship.

In any case, it is paramount that all parties understand their agreement, that
there are measures in place to prevent the breaking of this agreement, and that institutional buyers approach this negotiation with sensitivity and a grasp of the farmer’s business.

Buyers can also inform farmers of farmers’ rights under the *Perishable Agricultural Commodities Act* (PACA), which protects farmers from buyers failing to honor their payment agreements.

**CODE OF CONDUCT:**

Some farmers said they had experienced instances of discrimination and harassment. However, they were unsure what to do without a standardized course of action. They were afraid to come forward and report these instances because they thought doing so might jeopardize future purchasing relationships.

There should be a clear procedure for farmers:

1. State explicitly in writing that your institution has zero tolerance for any form of discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, or ability.

2. Ensure that the farmers with whom you are working have a point person they can turn to in the event of an incident of discrimination or harassment and that they are briefed in advance regarding this reporting process.

3. Make clear to the farmers that there will be no retaliation for reaching out to this point person and that using the provided recourse in no way jeopardizes the purchasing relationship.

4. Use professional language and behavior.

There may be a number of pain points in all the above processes, and cases may vary depending on the farmers, distributors, and institutional buyers that are a part of these agreements. But if all parties can recognize the existing, imbalanced power dynamics of supplier-client relationships; strive to dismantle them; show a commitment to working through all the details; and demonstrate a willingness to continue, then these reimagined purchasing relationships are more than possible.
The institutional buyer commits to purchasing specific products from specific farmers via the distributor.

Now, the distributor knows the products it sources will be purchased by the institutional buyer.

And the farmer knows she has an outlet for her product. She is also aware of how much the distributor will pay her, and how much the institutional buyer will pay the distributor.

Pricing is kept confidential to the three entities, among whom it is wholly transparent. Internally, the three parties are aware of each other’s businesses and prices; if one party acts in bad faith, everyone will be able to see it, ultimately creating sufficient checks and balances.

A Transparent, Three-Pronged Approach

R&DE Stanford Dining, Hospitality & Auxiliaries employs a three-pronged approach which engages the institutional buyer, the distributor, and the farmer. All parties have mutual knowledge of their respective roles and are transparent about pricing. By emphasizing open, regular communication, this three-pronged approach helps to foster both 1:1 relationships and collaborative relationships across all three parties.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF MEASURING PROGRESS:

Since this initiative is a long-term commitment, Stanford plans to track several metrics to evaluate the program’s effectiveness over time. The most essential outcomes will be economic benefits to Black farmers—increasing financial support and stability through long-term business relationships and scaled production, as well as opportunities for new business with other institutions based on the models being developed.
THE “E” IN DEI:

The R&DE Stanford Food Institute and Farms To Grow, Inc, value diversity, equity, and inclusion (D”E”I). This toolkit focuses on equity in particular; as the Farms To Grow, Inc team has witnessed over the years, discussions of DEI can sometimes leave out this crucial component.

As the National Association of Colleges and Employers notes [27]:

The term “equity” refers to fairness and justice and is distinguished from equality: Whereas equality means providing the same to all, equity means recognizing that we do not all start from the same place and must acknowledge and make adjustments to imbalances.

That is why understanding the history of discrimination perpetrated against Black farmers is so vital—it means acknowledging that Black farmers are not starting with equal access to opportunities.

THE PERSONAL, THE INTERPERSONAL:

Equity relies on systemic changes to policies and practices, like the ones outlined in this toolkit. But the work of DEI also occurs on the personal and interpersonal levels to help create a culture of inclusion and retain diversity.

All readers of this toolkit are encouraged to consult this guide on inclusive language [28] and to consider their actions, gestures, and non-verbal body language. Some farmers we interviewed spoke about e-mails they had received that were disrespectful, intentionally or not. Others recalled instances of racial microaggressions: for instance, one farm owner and operator has been approached on multiple occasions on the property and asked, “Where’s the owner?” These situations cause undue disrespect, but they can be avoided by not making assumptions.

AN INTRODUCTION TO UNCONSCIOUS BIAS:

We all hold beliefs about various identity groups based on social stereotypes. Whether those beliefs are conscious to us or not, they influence the way we behave and treat other people.

Implicit bias tests [29] are a good starting point for readers to reflect on the biases they may hold.

PAGE 37
We should point out, as well, that this section on cultural awareness is merely an introduction to what will be an ongoing process for any individual and for any organization that individual represents. We also hope that these principles are apparent throughout the entire toolkit, and that every decision foodservice operators make—with regard to outreach, purchasing, etc.—has a foundation in diversity, equity, and inclusion.
It also shares the stories of Black farmers nationwide, gathered through 10 interviews demonstrating their challenges and triumphs on the road to farming success. Their testimonies reveal that no Black farmer is alone in their struggles and that the rewards reaped from overcoming them are worth it.

You’ll also find resources on seeking out available funding, a Frequently Asked Questions section, and a glossary of terms used in the foodservice industry.

A Closing Thought

Natalí Johnson
Scott Agriculture LLC., Fresno, CA
The farmer continued: “Black farmers are an endangered species. And there are more bald eagles in the lower 48 states than there are Black row crop farmers.

“So if we don’t do something, if this industry doesn’t wake up and people don’t get on the same page to make something happen—we will be extinct.”

It is possible to reverse the disappearance of Black farms in the U.S. But we all have to play our part to make sure it happens.

In the 1960s, one farmer said, there were only about 400 nesting pairs of bald eagles in the lower 48 states. So the government made a multi-million dollar investment and enacted legislation to help protect these endangered birds.

Today, the bald eagle population has “climbed to an estimated 316,700 individual bald eagles in the lower 48 states,” [30] and bald eagles have been delisted from the Endangered Species Act.
Appendices

Glossary:

Carbon sequestration:
The storage of carbon in soils and vegetation. It is one of the primary methods for removing carbon from the earth’s atmosphere.

Diversified farming:
The practice of producing a variety of crops on one farm; the opposite of monocropping.

Hydroponics:
A technique in which plants are grown without soil. It uses less water than most soil-based systems.

Managed grazing:
A method of controlling when and where livestock graze, so that recently grazed areas can recover.

Pollinator protection:
Any practice that protects pollinators. For example: the growth of pollinator-friendly flowers, the avoidance of pesticides, or the development of bee farms.

Supply chain:
A network of individuals and companies that work together to make a product and deliver it to a consumer.

Wholesale:
The business of buying large quantities of goods from producers.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

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Chris Vlahopouliotis and Daylight Foods, Inc have been critical in Stanford’s onboarding of Black farmers thus far, and have shown commitment to this program from the beginning. Deep appreciation is also due to Stanford’s Office of Community Engagement whose generosity made this initiative possible.

To the food professionals who lent their expertise, empathy, and encouragement to this project: We are humbly grateful.

And to the farmers who contributed their time, wisdom, and deep insight: Thank you for sharing your stories with us. We hope we’ve done them justice.

FARMERS INTERVIEWED:

Jim Embry: Atrus Ballew Farm, Kentucky
Chris Fields: Fields Produce Farm, California
Paul Gaskin: Blue Ridge Ranch, California
Larry Jamison: Field Master Produce, Mississippi
Tomia MacQueen: Wildflower Farm, New Jersey
Will Scott Jr.: Scott Agriculture LLC., California
Donald Sherman: Sherman Produce. California
Tim Thomas: Thomas Family Farm. California
Carlton Turner: Sipp Culture, Mississippi

FOODSERVICE PROFESSIONALS INTERVIEWED:

Melissa Melshenker Ackerman, Planet Harvest
Doug Bohr, International Fresh Produce Association
H Nieto-Friga, Kitchen Table Advisors & SupplyChange
Haile Johnston, The Common Market
Ron Rainey, University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture
Lauren M. Scott, International Fresh Produce Association

ACCESS A DIGITAL VERSION OF THE TOOLKIT AT:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER READING

ABOUT U.S. BLACK FARMERS:


Bustillo, X. (2023, February 19). In 2022, Black farmers were persistently left behind from the USDA’s loan system. NPR.

Bustillo, X. (2023, February 26). Black farmers worry new approach on “race neutral” lending leaves them in the shadows. NPR.


Sewell, S. (2019, April 29). There were nearly a million black farmers in 1920. Why have they disappeared? The Guardian.


See the complete list of references cited in this toolkit here.
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