

Georgia's Farm Starter

How eco-entrepreneur Daron Joffe's town-by-town mission is re-energizing the state's food culture. And why Whole Foods is his biggest fan. BY JENNIFER DOME



Farmer D success story: Hampton Island Preserve



Daron Joffe, the organic gardener

At the beginning, Daron Joffe wanted to know where the tomato in his sandwich came from. Ten thousand tomatoes later, Daron, or Farmer D as he's called, is the guru of Georgia's organic farm movement. For the past few years, the native South African has circled the state to turn unsightly plots of land into thriving gardens and to teach the sustainable, biodynamic way. "I'm a farm starter," he says.

As the owner of Farmer D Organics, a hub of advice, products, and programs, Daron shines when his hands are in the garden. His partners-in-dirt range from backyard gardeners to restaurant owners, from neighborhood developers to charities. Here are five projects that show off his green thumb.

HAMPTON ISLAND PRESERVE, *Riceboro*

THE GARDEN Sixteen acres of crops (now overseen by organic farmer Cory Mosser) and a two-story barn of reclaimed bricks and timber. More than 200 herb varieties, some used in aromatic spa treatments. Mules churn Georgia sugarcane into syrup.

WHO BENEFITS Both the residents on the 4,000-acre development and Paul A. Paskins, the on-site chef with sophisticated menus

BIGGEST CHALLENGE Starting a farm on loamy marsh soil that Farmer D deemed "gumbo"

IN HIS WORDS "It's great because the vegetables are the most delicious and the herbs are so flavorful. I build my menus around what's available that day."

- Chef Paul A. Paskins



RONALD MCDONALD HOUSE, Savannah

THE GARDEN A backyard plot in a serene courtyard area the size of a small house. Daron hauled in organic dirt and planted an outside ring of tomatoes, corn, greens, cantaloupe, honeydew, other seasonal produce.

WHO BENEFITS Families with critically injured or ill children who live within 30 miles of Savannah

BIGGEST CHALLENGE Choosing plants to suit families in crisis

IN HER WORDS "Farmer D

jumped on board with us. He donated his time, mostly Saturdays and Sundays, and helped us get some great things in the ground." - *Nikole Layton, executive director, Ronald McDonald House Charities of the Coastal Empire*

BETHESDA HOME FOR BOYS, outside Savannah

THE GARDEN Bethesda owns more than 600 acres in Chatham County including a cattle farm. Four-and-a-half acres focus on growing Lowcountry staples—collard greens, sweet potatoes,

squash, tomatoes, spinach, and other vegetables and flowers.

WHO BENEFITS Students of the "oldest child-rearing institution" in the U.S., founded in 1740; nearby residents and restaurants

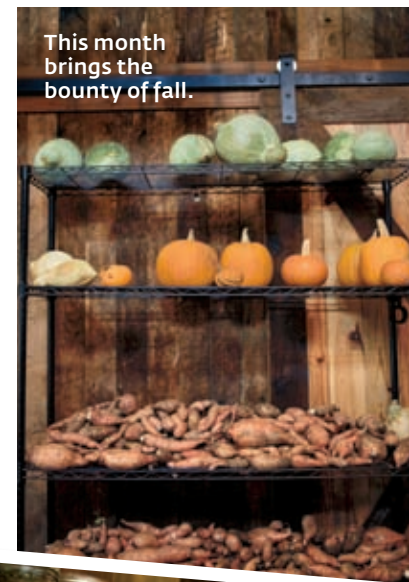
BIGGEST CHALLENGE Selecting the right site on a lowland marsh property

IN HIS WORDS "Students will be able to see the fruits of their labors. We can teach them about both entrepreneurship and the environment. Our core values can be integrated around this garden."

- *T. David Tribble, school president*



Weighing produce from the recent harvest



This month brings the bounty of fall.



Herbs for teas, foods, and even spa treatments

The difficult soil of Hampton Island Preserve now yields herbs and vegetables.



FULL MOON COOPERATIVE,
Athens
Part CSA/Part UGA Research Plot

THE GARDEN Part of a 100-acre education and research facility at Spring Valley EcoFarms. Farm director Jason Mann and his crew harvest eggplant, garlic, peas, pecans, sweet potatoes, squash, okra, and turnips.

WHO BENEFITS Families, UGA agroecology students, Farm 255 restaurant
BIGGEST CHALLENGE Daron juggled his

studies, ran a nonprofit, and helped UGA research scientist Carl Jordan and Jason start Full Moon—simultaneously.
IN HIS WORDS “At the time Athens’s local food system was underdeveloped, and people were hungry for what Full Moon could offer.” - *Jason Mann*

SERENBE FARMS, Palmetto
THE GARDEN Anchors one of four planned “hamlets” within this 1,000-acre, master-planned community. Blue-

Eyed Daisy Bakeshop, Harris and Clark Grocery, and two top-notch restaurants share the pickin’s with locals. This popular farm-to-table model has been hailed by CNN and *The New York Times*.
WHO BENEFITS Residents, day-tripping tourists, vacationers, and the Atlanta farmers market circuit who come to see New Urbanism gone organic.

BIGGEST CHALLENGE Finding old mattresses and tires in the soil, home construction adjacent to the farm, and raising soil quality to meet certified organic standards

IN THEIR WORDS “Daron took a worn-out piece of Georgia red clay and turned it into a vibrant organic farm.” - *Steve and Marie Nygren, founders of Serenbe* *

Watch Farmer D’s how-to videos on the Mother Nature Network at mnn.com.



Closing the Food Loop

Daron sells Farmer D label compost that actually originates from the recycled Green waste from Whole Foods Markets in Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Alabama. His main customers are farmers in places such as Newborn, Waynesboro, and Sylvania who regularly sell their produce to, yep, Whole Foods. It’s a cycle of modern-day life that ensures, yes, life.