



# Athens Land Trust

Celebrating 30 Years

**Newsletter**

Summer 2024 • Vol. 27 • Issue 1



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*Our Board meets on the third Monday of each month at 5:00 pm at 498 Prince Ave. Athens, GA 30601 Meetings are open to the public.*

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**West Broad FARMERS MARKET**

Every Saturday  
at the Rock Springs  
Park Picnic Shelter  
185 Columbus Avenue.  
11 am to 2 pm.

2nd + 4th Tuesdays at  
Athens Brewing Co. in  
Normaltown  
6 pm to 8 pm.

Fresh, Local Flavor  
& Community Fun

April 20 - Fall Dec 2024

SCAN TO  
LEARN MORE



685 N. Pope Street  
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www.athenslandtrust.org  
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*Athens Land Trust is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization whose mission is to improve quality of life for all and to strengthen the fabric of the community through education and the stewardship of land for affordable housing, conservation, agriculture, and economic development. We respond to community-identified needs and build individual and collective power among historically marginalized people.*

## Executive Director's Note | Heather Benham

Our farm issue has me reflecting on the ways we've grown over the last 30 years. Our community agriculture programming has served as the most incredible bridge between our original pillars of affordable housing and conservation. It has allowed us to grow our work with landowners in more equitable ways. At the same time we've increased the depth of our work from all the pounds of produce grown by the community gardeners, Young Urban Farmers, and Incubator Farmers -- produce that has supported families in the Clarke County School District.

There's the land that has been protected for community benefit: over 20,000 acres across the state, including farmland that will ensure that we have locally grown food for generations to come.

Then there's the stock of affordable housing we've grown: hundreds of apartments, 75 single family homes that will serve family after family moving into homeownership, and nearly 100 homes we have made repairs on so families can continue to thrive in their existing community.

We've helped thousands grow their own skills: from advocating on their neighborhood advisory board, to starting their own business, to having the confidence and know-how to purchase their first home.

*Above: Heather with ACC representatives and community members at the Williams Farm groundbreaking in 2013. Courtesy of Merritt Melancon/Flagpole Magazine  
On the cover: Diana Wilson, an incubator farmer at Williams Farm. Read about the program on page 8.*



I'm so proud of how we've been able to partner with the community to accomplish this amazing work.

I also can't say enough about how I've grown -- from pigtailed and overalls, to some days actually needing to wear a suit and tone down the glitter eyeshadow (!) so we can host the Secretary of Energy, or The Kresge Foundation, or countless others who make their way to Athens to learn from our innovative strategies for holistic community development.

I have so much gratitude for the opportunities that were afforded to me here - particularly to the families who welcomed me into their family, to the amazing folks who put their time and energy into growing this organization to where it is today, to the strong and smart women who have inspired and supported me along the way, and to my family who lovingly shared me with this work.

After 20 years with the organization, it feels like the right time to step away and watch the harvest from a new vantage point. I won't be leaving the field, it's become a part of my DNA at this point, so I am excited to have the opportunity to join luminaries of the community land trust world like John Davis, the man who helped establish Athens Land Trust 30 years ago, at Burlington Associates helping community land trust startups around the Southeast begin this incredible journey for themselves. It's inspiring to see the community land trust movement come into vogue for the elegant solution that it is, and it is an honor to have so many look to the work of Athens Land Trust as a model for their community needs. I'll continue to highlight our great work in my new role and will continue to cheer the organization on as it grows for the next 30 years. ♦

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Heather Benham'. The signature is fluid and cursive.

# The Interview

## Dr. Jean Young

### on growing for the greater good

*Dr. Jean Young is an educator, filmmaker, and a local grower originally from Chicago's Northshore. Three years ago through ALT's incubator program at Williams Farm Jean began developing her urban micro-farm enterprise, Freedom City Gardens, LLC. Jean is now transitioning production to the Global Growers Network organic farm in Conyers, GA thanks to a land match through ALT's GA FarmLink (see the feature on page 6 for more on this program). Jean has a long relationship with urban foodways and growing, and she's here to talk about this journey.*

#### **With the extensive background that you have, how did you end up on the farm?**

I have a long experiential history with people's choices around what and where they eat and how food helps to create community. Recently, I've been thinking about conservation and how responsible systems of farming can prevent loss of arable land, regenerate degraded lands, and importantly, affect climate change.

During the pandemic, we became alarmed by how BIPOC people experienced four times higher rates of COVID-19 and subsequent deaths. Around the same time, I became aware of the Beginning Farmers program at Athens Land Trust. I knew about [ALT] and



the West Broad Farmers Market. It was one of the first places I found in Athens where I sensed community once I moved here to complete my doctoral studies. I felt Williams Farm was the perfect place to get busy.

#### **Do you recall your first moment of awareness around food and the practice of eating healthy?**

I certainly do! I was a youngster when my father brought home the biggest bags of red ripe heirloom tomatoes -- all summer long. They were beautiful and delicious, so juicy, tart, and sweet all at the same time. My parents provided us with the best, but they were enamored with the new-style convenience foods, i.e., frozen vegetables. Heirloom tomatoes became my "gateway" vegetable and after tasting them, there was no turning back. I wondered what other vegetables would taste this good if they were homegrown. So from that point forward, I insisted on having a

garden and growing alongside my mother. I had one until going away to college.

I've been aware for a long time of the areas where communities have limited access to fresh healthy produce. Some call these areas food deserts. A more recent and accurate term coined by food sovereignty leader Karen Washington is 'food apartheid' or a system of segregation dividing those with access and those without, often drawn along racial and class lines. As part of my journey, I am drawn to this question, "Who holds the power over what and how people eat?"

#### **What's next for you, Farmer Jean?**

I've recently transitioned most of my operation to Global Growers Network, an international association of growers who face barriers to accessing farmland and agriculture resources. Here, I'll continue to grow and cultivate food. I hope to turn even more youngsters onto healthy eating, the way I was turned on to it years ago by my family.

Many reports say that farmers are aging out. But I think farmers tend to live longer and healthier than most. Farming can be demanding work, but bringing fresh nutritious food to the community is more important for me than any life option I can think of right now. ♦

# West Broad Farmers Market

Fresh, Local Flavor and Community Fun!

The West Broad Farmers Market made its debut this season at Rocksprings Park thanks to a partnership with Athens-Clarke County Leisure Services -- a move that comes with infrastructure and visibility to help further our mission of making fresh, affordable food and other community resources more accessible to residents of West Broad and the Hancock Corridor.

We couldn't be more excited about the lovely shaded pavilion, the view to the playground with its joyful ringing of children's voices, and the chance to be a part of family fun every weekend.



We're also thrilled to join the great community groups who are part of Athens Diaper Bank's Partner Program for 2024. Families can register and pick up diapers right at the market. We're collaborating to distribute enough diapers to keep up to 20 local babies clean, dry, and healthy every month.

Join us every Saturday at the Rocksprings Park pavilion from 11 am - 2 pm and on the second and fourth Tuesdays of the month

at Authentic Brewing Co. from 5 - 8 pm. The season runs through mid-December and until then the calendar is full of special events including our annual Juneteenth Celebration, a back to school block party in July, the Fall Festival and more. And micro-enterprise development is underway with the Young Urban Farmers cafe and farmstand, with youth-grown plants, baked goods, and coffee brewed on the spot.

Our farm issue is a great place to remind you that 90 cents out of every dollar you spend at a farmers market goes to the seller compared to less than 8 cents at a large retailer.\* Shopping at the West Broad Farmers Market not only means you are getting the freshest produce, but that you are supporting small local and regional farmers directly! ♦

*Top: The West Broad Farmers Market is hosting more farmers than ever, including weekly offerings from the Williams Farm incubators and the Young Urban Farmers.*

*Center: Karen Bonilla, owner and operator of El Sabrositos, prepares Salvadoran style pupusas from scratch at the Tuesday market at Authentic Brewing Co.*

*Bottom: As always, the West Broad Farmers Market accepts EBT for eligible purchases and matches every dollar spent on fresh produce, doubling purchasing power for families facing food insecurity.*

*\* USDA Economic Research Service. (2022). Food Dollar Series, Quick Facts.*



# Feature Story

## Farming for the Future

### Georgia FarmLink connects landowners with the next generation of farmers

Did you know that you are more likely to meet a farmer in America who is over age 65 than under 44? Farmers are the nation's oldest workforce, and more than half of all current farmers are likely to retire in the next decade. When this happens, there is the potential for millions of acres of farmland to change hands. Yet for farmers entering the industry, securing land tenure is among the biggest challenges.

In Georgia, surging development and loss of working farmland compounds the challenge and prices land that is available out of reach for most new farmers. The 2022 Agricultural Census revealed that farm and land loss around that state's major metro areas is growing rapidly with a loss of 3,175 farms in the past five years.

In the face of this threat to Georgia's agricultural future, many aging landowners want to

preserve operations on family farmland if or when their children opt out of the business.

#### How GA FarmLink helps

GA FarmLink was developed to tackle the challenge of matching land seekers with landholders. In 2019 we worked with national and statewide partners to co-develop the web tool ([gafarmlink.org](http://gafarmlink.org)) to help beginning farmers find affordable pathways to farmland ownership and to facilitate farmland succession planning for retiring landowners.

Early matches during the Covid-19 disruption were hard won. However, in the last six months we have supported five successful matches with two currently pending. GA FarmLink targets historically underserved farmers and organizations by providing tailored support. This includes connecting a farmer in our Williams Farm incubator

program with the Global Growers Network which partners with people from diverse cultures, including resettled refugees and immigrants, to grow fresh food for their families and for local marketplaces. She is now farming a one-acre plot at the non-profit's 20-acre farm in Rockdale County. (Meet Farmer Jean in *The Interview* on page 4.)

In addition to land matching, the site is also a resource hub to connect farmers to service providers, educational materials and support in the acquisition or transition process.

#### More than a website

During the pandemic and in its wake, the demand for rural property has grown rapidly as have requests for farm training, experience and support. Between 2021 and 2023, web traffic and engagement on [gafarmlink.org](http://gafarmlink.org) grew by nearly 2,000 percent.



The increase in web traffic has resulted in an increase in land availability and considerable growth in number of farm seekers from a monthly average of 50 in 2021 to more than 600 in March of this year.

### The "Year Zero" farmer

Still, 75 percent of registered farm seekers have indicated that they have NO farming knowledge or experience. This is why one of the biggest developments taking place with GA FarmLink is the creation of a "nuts and bolts" training program for the beginning farmer.

"Beginning farmers" are typically considered those with one to ten years of farming experience. GA FarmLink also aims to work with the "year zero" farmer: helping the truly beginning farmer from the germination of an idea through to the reality of accessing and farming a piece of land.

With the average age of beginning farmers rising to a recent high of 47 years, most do not come to farming through the agricultural college route, nor is that a feasible training path. In addition, farming like any business faces the stark fact that 20% of new businesses fail during the first two years, and 65% during the first 10 years.

GA FarmLink is working to raise the success rate by creating a firmer foundation of basic farm business knowledge before

agricultural entrepreneurs take the leap and shoulder the risk of leasing or buying land.

### Georgia's farming future

The momentum behind GA FarmLink is exciting, and it's growing! Still, there's a lot of work to be done to get beginning farmers to the place where they have the business acumen and resources to lease or buy their own land and launch a successful farm business.

So while we continue to work intentionally with underserved farmers to deliver training and technical assistance in these key areas, we're also building the capacity of farmers themselves to train their peers.

Through an innovative model we're connecting annual cohorts of working small farmers with group and 1:1 business coaching, on-the-farm field days, listening sessions with USDA representatives, and a yearly stipend to equip them to provide peer leadership and mentorship to the next year's group of participants.

Our partnership with McIntosh S.E.E.D. (which has more than 25 years' experience in Sustainable Environment and Economic Development in and around McIntosh County) is helping us to serve farmers from the northeast to southeastern and coastal Georgia. The forecast is in: our farming future is bright! ♦



**1,640**  
ag acres  
available  
for sale or lease



**600+**  
registered  
land seekers



**2,000**  
% growth  
in website  
engagement



**10**  
land seekers  
matched to  
land owners

# Connecting Farmers to Families

*Williams Farm and CCSD partner to provide fresh produce*

At the beginning of this year a new cohort of incubator farmers began their educational program at Williams Farm under the guidance of a program "graduate". Joy Brown was among the first group of beginning farmers to lease small plots at ALT's downtown farm and receive hands-on training from the Williams Farm Manager.



That title now belongs to Joy, and she's mentoring this group of women as they grow food, build their skills, and nourish their community. This year the incubator program is partnering with the Clarke County School District (CCSD) Office of Family and Community Engagement to stock school food pantries with fresh local produce. Each incubator has been designated a plot and a set of crops to grow.



*Top: Incubator farmers Breanna Jackson, Elexies White and Ce'toura Neal, along with Diane Wilson (pictured on the cover) are learning about small farm operation while growing weekly produce bags for families across four elementary schools. Below: Family Engagement Specialist Sarah Halstead meets Williams Farm Manager Joy Brown to pick up weekly produce bags on May 8, 2024.*

Late April saw the first harvest -- produce bags for 12 families at one elementary school. The next week the incubators harvested and packed for two schools. One week later the incubators harvested for all four schools that we are serving to bring produce to 48 families. Over the 30-week program, the incubators will have harvested 1,400 produce shares for these families!

Sarah Halstead, Lead Family Engagement Specialist for the district, coordinates produce delivery to the schools and says,

***"Our families have been thrilled to have fresh produce and we're very grateful that we can work with ALT to help combat food insecurity in the community. "***

"The partnership with [Athens Land Trust] is in full swing and going great! Our families have been thrilled to have fresh produce and we're very grateful

that we can work with ALT to help combat food insecurity in the community and get produce into the hands of families who may otherwise not have access to fresh foods."

Meanwhile, we're also preparing the incubators to sell at farmers markets and build partnerships with restaurants, grocery stores, and other outlets as they move into their second year of the program to help them continue to sustain themselves and the community! ♦



# Home Grown

*Dublin St. homes keep historic East Athens affordable*

The first phase of construction at Dublin St. is complete, and with it three new permanently affordable homes will be added to Athens' supply of housing that is in reach for low- and moderate-income families. Eventually, a total of eight homes will grace the wooded lots nestled into the East Athens community.

The Dublin St. development is ALT's first construction project undertaken with American Rescue Plan funds allocated for affordable housing by the Athens-Clarke County Mayor and Commission. We're grateful for the local investment in the Community Land Trust model for permanent affordability; planting stimulus dollars into this project ensures that the benefits that grow will serve generations of homeowners.

As the affordability gap in Athens grows -- the difference between the cost of housing being built and what many families can afford -- we're proud that these homes will serve as an asset for stability and preservation for the existing residents. We're thrilled to invite the community to celebrate with us at the ribbon cutting, and to tour these beautiful EarthCraft certified energy efficient homes on Tuesday, June 25th. As three new families close on these homes, they -- and we -- will begin the next steps in building for the future. ♦

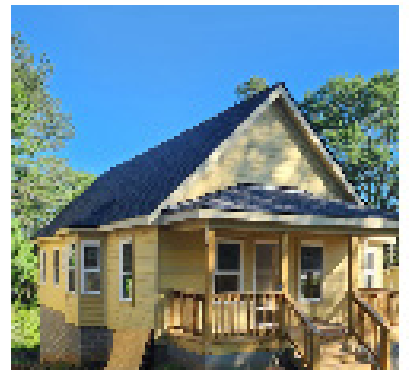
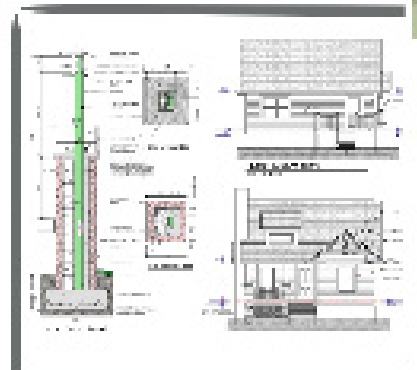


## RIBBON CUTTING & OPEN HOUSE

250 Dublin St. Athens, GA 30601

June 25, 2024 | 4:00 - 6:00 pm

Celebrating the completion of three new permanently affordable single-family homes.



Building more affordable, quality homes by the Athens-Clarke County Department of Housing and Community Development (ADHC) and EarthCraft Community of the United Government of Athens-Clarke County, an Equal Opportunity Employer. Participants will not be discriminated against based on race, color, religion, disability, sex, age, marital status, or gender identity, genetic information, or national origin.

# The Upcountry Oyster Roast

*Bivalves, brews and beats*

With the help of an amazing group of volunteers (pictured at center right), generous sponsors and a bevy of creative partners, we held this year's Upcountry Oyster Roast on the sunny patio of Athentic Brewing Co. in early April.

"Upcountry" reminds us of the impact all of us upstream have on the oyster beds' coastal ecosystem. The Sapelo Sea Farms oysters paired particularly well this year with a specialty beer made just for us by Athentic -- Land Sakes Lager -- and with the soulful sounds of Bichos Vivos.

The Oyster Roast began in 2012 as a way to commemorate ALT's annual achievements in land conservation. This year's event was held in honor of 30 years as a Conservation and Community Land Trust.

Land conservation is about land justice; not only preserving land -- including farmland -- for environmental health and abundance, but stewarding land for community benefit and working in solidarity with low-wealth people of color toward land justice: centering ecological, social, and racial justice in decisions about how land is used. We're proud of the progress we've made, and dedicated to continuing this work. ♦



Top: Photo courtesy of Athentic Brewing Company.



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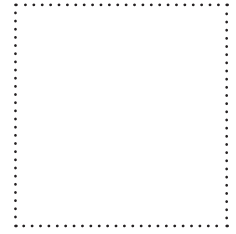
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# Athens Land Trust

Celebrating 30 Years

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\$250    \$500    \_\_\_\_\_  
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Would you like to join our email list?    Yes    No

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