

How a farmers market supports Louisiana growers before, during, and after disasters

At the Crescent City Farmers Market in New Orleans, vendors preach good food, help each other through disasters, and seek connection.

by [Autumn Jemison](#) March 21, 2023

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New Orleans has always had a special relationship with food. Street food vendors have been around since at least the 1800s, and [were even used in marketing campaigns to attract visitors to the city](#). The first food market building, the French Market, was erected in 1791, selling meat, spices, vegetables, and fish. While food systems have globalized, New Orleans has maintained local food cultures, traditions, recipes and, lately, seen the return of a vibrant market scene.

Market Umbrella, a nonprofit that puts on the Crescent City Farmers Market (CCFM) in City Park, Mid-City, and Uptown, has helped drive this trend. Started in 1995, the CCFM invites different farmers and sellers specializing in flowers, vegetables, fruits, pasta, seeds, spices and prepared cuisines to participate in weekly markets. Market Umbrella's goal is to fuel the local food economy while caring for community health.

In New Orleans, [23% of residents live more than half mile from a grocery store](#), with certain tracts of the city considered food deserts. The cost of fresh food can also be prohibitive for the [nearly quarter of the population living in poverty](#).

Angelina Harrison, Director of Markets for Market Umbrella, believes the CCFM has a duty to serve its producers and consumers in sustainable and

accessible ways. “Small scale is much more resilient and sustainable,” Harrison said. “Large scale is exploitative and brittle.”

CCFM runs various programs, like the [Farmers Market Nutrition Program](#), [Market Match](#), and [SNAP Education](#) to increase affordability for shoppers. The [Greaux the Good](#) program takes customers’ SNAP benefits and doubles them to increase their spending power at the market.

CCFM also has initiatives in place for vendors. They offer networking opportunities, technical assistance for growers, and small business development classes. They also connect producers with other potential clients, including schools, food banks, or restaurants.

In addition, they’ve become a resource center for farmers to find information about natural disasters in New Orleans. Weekly newsletters have surveys attached asking farmers to detail their needs before a storm occurs, so the market can be proactive in responding, and explains the market’s protocols for bringing back vendors after a hurricane.

In October 2021, two months after Hurricane Ida, the market raised over \$180,000 for mutual aid grants. Farmers could apply to receive financial assistance for damaged equipment or crops. CCFM dispersed \$500 to their vendors who applied for a grant, largely to cover immediate needs like water, food, light, ice and gas. Some applicants received more if they applied to both applications. The money helped growers as they waited for federal aid to come through, a process that could take weeks or months. CCFM also started a [YouTube](#) channel to share information on how to prepare for hurricanes. They want vendors to be ready for storms and able to bounce back quickly so that customers know they can rely on their local food producers.

“We like to think we’re serving consumers from childhood all the way through their lives,” said Harrison.

Many of the vendors at CCFM share the organization's values around community, quality food, and mutual aid. Meet just three farmers who fit that mold.

LESTER WILLIAMS: SMALL-SCALE VEGETABLE FARMER

Batchelor, La.



Lester Williams standing tall in his vegetable field behind his home in Batchelor, La. (Photo by Autumn Jemison)

Lester Williams, CEO of Williams Produce and Coupee Minority Farmers Cooperative, has been growing produce in Batchelor, La. for decades. First introduced to gardening by his mother, Williams loved the freedom and fun he experienced while working the soil.

“Our parents always had gardens, so I’ve always grown up with one in my backyard,” Williams said. “When my mother got older, she had to start going to the store to get her produce. She hated it. The greens were filthy, she didn’t know where they were coming from, and she got tired of eating frozen foods.”

Williams began to grow vegetables in his childhood garden so his mother could have the fresh food she’d always fed him. She began sharing the produce her son grew with her friends, who preferred it to their local grocery store’s offerings. After graduating from high school in 1978, Williams jumped into the agriculture industry.

He started by working with his local agricultural cooperative. They leased him land and sold his harvest on his behalf, giving him a stable income. He grew an array of beans like soy, pinto, red, kidney, and more on about 700 acres. But Williams wanted more control over what he grew and he disliked having to apply for government loans to help get him from one growing season to the next. Often, he said, the local U.S. Department of Agriculture representative would deny him the loans, straining his finances. (There is a [longstanding and well-documented pattern](#) of this happening to Black farmers in the U.S.)

He recalled when he received one loan denial letter as he was putting together a logging crew in an attempt to earn money outside of his farming operation. “I looked down at the letter, put it on the dresser, and regrouped with some other farmers,” Williams said. “They weren’t going to get to me.”

Williams joined the successful [Pigford v. Glickman class action lawsuit](#) that showed the USDA didn’t give equal access to assistance to Black and white farmers.

The experience steered Williams to look for different growing and distribution models. He sold greens, beets, and squash to Piggly Wiggly, but

found his profit margins unsustainable. He tried setting up produce stands in his community but that was complicated. “It can get tricky in my community because everyone knows everyone,” he said. “I can’t give free produce to one person and try to sell something to the next. It doesn’t look good for business.”

He looked for new buyers in other towns, like New Roads and Baton Rouge, and in industries like restaurants and schools. That didn’t work either because, Williams said, government agencies require costly certifications to sell to schools. For example, schools may require [Good Agriculture Practices \(GAP\) and Good Handling Practices \(GHP\) certifications](#) or may need to meet local and state [requirements](#).

“This is the problem. People will come down and say, ‘You don’t have the right equipment. You need to update it,’” Williams said. “This is what pushes farmers out because we can’t afford to continue to keep up with the latest technology that bigger farmers use.”

To help supplement his farm income Williams started working for the Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD) in 2003, helping New Orleans prepare for storms and clean up once they pass. He plans to retire next year.



Williams shares his educational and resource materials for rural farming in Louisiana. (Photo by Autumn Jemison)

“When I reached my remaining two years, I told the Lord if you can get me through two hurricane seasons and one snow/ice storm that’s it!” Williams said.

He never stopped farming during his 20 years with the DOTD. In 2012, Williams met Harrison, who at the time was working with a now-closed market called Hollygrove Farmers Market. She encouraged Williams to try selling there. When Harrison joined CCFM, in 2016, Williams followed her there.

“I like farmers markets because they help me communicate with other farmers and sell more of my produce,” Williams said.

The farmers market has turned out to be a good option for him. Williams likes the connections he makes with other producers. Being a vendor also allows him to communicate with his customers and find new buyers. He's become a lead producer for the Second Harvest Food Bank. Selling at CCFM has tripled his farming income compared to his co-op days, so he can afford to buy new seeds to plant different crops. He leans on gardening books to guide him on how and when to plant his crops.



Williams flips through gardening books at his home. (Photo by Autumn Jemison)

As he gets older he's become interested in talking about his journey as a farmer. He recently went to his own childhood school to teach kindergarteners how to grow food.

"It made me feel great to teach a child something that they may need in the future," Williams said. "They may go back and say, 'I know where that comes from and how to do it!' I didn't just teach them about the fruit and

vegetables that they eat, but also teaching them how to go and grow it themselves. That’s one of the key things: to learn how to do it.”

It’s a skill that’s served him well.

ANNIE MOORE AND CHERYL NUNES: URBAN FARMERS

Algiers, La.



Annie Moore (left) and Cheryl Nunes wrap up their space after a CSA day in one of SPROUT’s community gardens. (Photo by Autumn Jemison)

Annie Moore and Cheryl Nunes lived in New Orleans in 2011 repairing and rebuilding houses after Hurricane Katrina. When they moved, they wanted to come back. With Nunes’ love of farming and Moore’s business

experience in non-profits, they packed up their life in Massachusetts and returned to the Big Easy in 2017.

They started by growing on an urban lot to sell their crops in pop-up markets at their local coffee shop and participating in the ReFresh Market run by SPROUT NOLA, a nonprofit that works with small farmers in the city. Eventually, they set up an 88 acre farm in the West Bank growing kale, spinach, arugula, and many more greens becoming vendors at the Crescent City Farmers Market. They called their operation River Queen Greens.

Video by Autumn Jemison

“It’s fun running an unconventional business,” Moore said. “Four days a week we’re at the farm from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. On Tuesdays and Thursdays we do our distribution. Wednesday afternoons and Fridays are our office work days. I like having a lot of variety in my day.”

In 2020, they set up a Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA, service, where subscribers receive a weekly box of produce they choose from the River Queen Greens offerings.

“Doing the market and CSA is always exciting,” Moore said. “I always look forward to it. I like interacting with our customers. Everyone’s always happy and eating delicious food and feeling the abundance. It’s a time when we share with the community.”

But in-person market days came to a halt when COVID-19 lockdowns began in March 2020. All public areas that couldn’t maintain the social distancing guidelines closed, so many farmers could not have face-to-face interactions. Rather than returning immediately to the market once it reopened, RQG pivoted to 100% sales through their CSA. The connections made prior to the pandemic made all the difference for RQG, and their business grew.

“When COVID first hit the world, we had just started our online pre-subscription, so it was super easy for us to pivot to 100% online,” Moore said. “We were able to package things to follow the no-touch protocol. It was a very easy transition, so we scaled up massively. Within a couple of weeks, we went from having 40 customers to having over 200 customers.”

Their farm didn’t produce enough food for the expanded customer base, so they started buying additional produce from other farmers. They became a valuable outlet for farmers whose sales were dropping as customers like restaurants, schools and markets closed.

“It was important to us to bring extra sales to our fellow farmers during such a difficult time,” Moore said.

She said it was especially meaningful to work with rural growers, many of whom had limited internet access or were less savvy with technology. Moore also led a bookkeeping workshop for CCFM.

Moore and Nunes were ecstatic to get back to in-person selling in 2021, but another catastrophe disrupted their routine. On August 29, Hurricane Ida blew through coastal Louisiana damaging island towns and fishing villages. The strong winds and heavy rainfall broke traffic lights, shattered glass, and crippled infrastructure like trash collection and sewer service. Throughout Louisiana, agriculture saw at least [\\$584 million in damage](#). Harrison said a majority of CCFM vendors were hit during this storm. Moore and Nunes’ farm escaped without significant harm, so the Queens looked for ways to lend a helping hand to affected farmers.

“The first few weeks we pitched in by doing \$1000 Costco runs and delivering the supplies to people in need,” Moore said. “We didn’t want to just sit around. Like what can we do to help?” Eventually she worked with CCFM as a part of their selection committee to help determine how to distribute the funds they raised.



Some of the Queens' harvested greens packaged up and ready to go. (Photo by Autumn Jemison)

In addition, the Queens helped raise donations for one of their employees whose home was damaged after Ida. Moore says disasters are not a one time occurrence; she wants to see more solutions and programs to help farmers before and during future storms.

“Having more resources and reshifting what disaster relief is,” Moore said. “It’s not just a reaction to whatever disaster just happened, but also planning for future things and improving conditions. So when the next storm comes, things aren’t as disastrous the next time it happens. How do we improve conditions for growers year round so that they can thrive even when another disaster comes along?”

TERENCE JACKSON: ADVOCATE AND EDUCATOR

New Orleans, La.



Terence Jackson at SPROUT's Press Street location in New Orleans. (Photo by Autumn Jemison)

Terence Jackson is a fifth generation farmer from Tuskegee, Ala., where he learned to farm alongside his family in rich soil on expansive fields.

In 2021, he took his farming skills and moved to New Orleans as a contractor for SPROUT NOLA, an organization that focuses on supporting small growers' technical and marketing needs. Among other initiatives, SPROUT has a longstanding relationship with the Crescent City Farmers Market. SPROUT allows farmers just starting out to use their table at CCFM to build up a customer base and smooth out their market day routines. The two nonprofits have also partnered on various programs, like the Flower Collective, an initiative that works with flower growers to produce blooms in Louisiana's hot weather. Jackson also led a workshop

training farmers to expand their revenue through agritourism, crop diversification, and value-added products.

Jackson started settling into his new role and adjusting to planting in the highly compacted soil in SPROUT's urban community gardens. Within his first two weeks on the job, Hurricane Ida hit.



Jackson tending to the crops and fishing out the weeds. (Photo by Autumn Jemison)

“Hurricane Ida was one natural disaster that made me say, ‘This is really bad,’” Jackson said. “That was my first time actually being in a situation where I felt like, ‘Oh, we may not be able to go home.’ My wife and I came back before most of her family, so we saw all the damage first-hand. We had water damage and mold in our apartment which took a while for them to fix. Some never did get fixed. I had just planted a whole new bed of crops, too, that were all destroyed.”

Stories from his ancestors about how they managed their farm for more than a century pushed Jackson to want to do more for his farming community. He believes his responsibility as a farmer is to provide for others, which may not be limited to food.

“Ida forced me to quickly adjust, so I could help those in my community,” he said. “I was passing out water, talking to people, spreading resources.”

It was a wake-up call for SPROUT to look more closely at disaster preparedness for farmers, too. Storms are a constant in New Orleans, and Jackson is figuring out additional ways SPROUT can serve growers. When he visits a farm, he brings his drone with him to photograph it for insurance purposes. Having photographic evidence of the farm’s condition pre-disaster makes getting aid and filing paperwork for relief easier.

Another initiative that’s important to Jackson is finding ways to build a bridge for more farmers to connect with one another, exchange knowledge on growing, and share it with the next generation of farmers. Jackson organizes meet-ups for farmers from around Louisiana to come together at one of SPROUT’s locations. They discuss practicalities, like how to prepare for storms and what markets have been good for business, but they also tell stories about their journeys into farming and their connections to the land. Most farmers are over 50 years old, and Jackson says the way to get them to open up is through storytelling.

“Sitting down and sharing experiences from the past to now of how we (farmers) are continuously carrying on that legacy. It’s important that they are the ones who share these stories because many times it’s never told from their perspective,” Jackson said.

READ MORE ABOUT TERENCE JACKSON AND SPROUT NOLA:



Can community gardens bring rural and urban farmers together after disasters? Q&A with Sprout NOLA's Terence Jackson

by **Autumn Jemison**

He also thinks it's stories that will bring new people to farming. But stories alone can't do it. SPROUT runs a community garden, where experienced farmers can teach young people how to grow. Jackson says it's reassuring to the older farmers to know that there are young people stepping into the agricultural industry, while young people learn valuable skills.

Jackson likes teaching and when he's not at SPROUT, he is training high school students how to garden at the New Orleans Center of Creative Arts. He focuses on the fundamentals of gardening, shows them how to work with seeds, and tells them the history of farming.

“The most rewarding part of teaching is them retaining the information at the end,” Jackson said. “When a student asks a question, their peer is already giving them the answer. Farmers love to see young people try to learn this industry because they know it's difficult. But in that more respect grows, and it stays alive.”