THE BLACK FARMER WHO SHAPED AMERICA’S COOPERATIVE APPROACH TO FOOD

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By Femi Redwood

Coop members volunteer our time and pay up-front membership fees because we believe these shared investments make our food systems stronger. Also, this makes our produce cost less than at traditional grocery stores, and farmers earn more profit than they would selling to large chains.

This is the same idea behind Community Supported Agriculture, commonly known as CSAs.

You might think CSAs started in the 1980s in affluent Northeast communities, but they were actually started by a Black horticulturist, Booker T. Whatley, who pushed this model decades earlier to help small farms. His vision continues to empower communities to make grocery shopping affordable, while also investing in local farmers.

Born in 1915 in Anniston, Alabama, a predominantly Black community, Whatley and his 11 younger siblings were raised on their family farm. “My granddaddy made all the syrup that came out of his community, castrated all the hogs, shoed the horses, built the doorsteps …he was one of those guys who could do everything,” he told *Mother Earth News* in 1982.

That early education in farming and self-sufficiency helped shape the rest of his life.

> AT TUSKEGEE, BOOKER T. WHATLEY DEVELOPED 15 VARIETIES OF MUSCADINE GRAPES, NAMING ONE “FOXXY LOTTIE” AFTER HIS WIFE.

After earning a B.S. in agriculture from Alabama A&M University, a historically Black college and university (HBCU), he was drafted into the army and served in the Korean

War, where he worked on a hydroponic farm. The scientist he worked under urged him to earn a Ph.D. in horticulture from Rutgers University, which he did in 1957. He then became the chairman of the horticulture department at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Later, in 1969, he was offered a professorship at Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University).

At Tuskegee, Whatley developed 15 varieties of muscadine grapes, naming one "Foxxy Lottie" after his wife. He also worked on sweet potato breeding, developing five varieties, and advocated that Southern farmers grow sweet potatoes to help them compete with the growing corporatization of agriculture.

"With sweet potatoes, Alabama could compete with the Midwest in carbohydrate production," he told *Neighbors* Magazine.

Throughout his life, he noticed that family farms were being replaced by large companies, and Black farms were declining. According to a collaborative report by the National Black Farmers Association and other organizations, 14 percent of all US farmers were Black in 1920. By 1964, less than 6 percent were Black.

> WHATLEY CREATED A PLAN AS EARLY AS THE 1960S THAT HE BELIEVED WOULD ALLOW FARMERS TO MAKE MORE MONEY WHILE USING FEWER RESOURCES.

One issue Black farmers faced was unfair treatment from the federal government. A 1965 report from the Commission on Civil Rights (PDF) found that the USDA discriminated against Black farmers when providing loans and conservation payments.

This impacted the financial stability of Black farmers and contributed to land loss. As a solution to this, and the increased competition from corporate-owned agriculture, Whatley created a plan as early as the 1960s that he believed would allow farmers to make more money while using fewer resources. A significant component of his plan

was a shopping model similar to contemporary CSAs, what he called Clientele Membership Clubs.

Members would pay an upfront fee for a season of produce. He suggested fees should be due at the beginning of the year, which is often a farmer's slow season. Families would pick their own produce. These clubs would guarantee that farmers would have income and that families would save 40 percent on food prices.

Clientele Membership Clubs wouldn't be limited to produce; some might have places for families to catch their own fish or buy slaughtered livestock.

WHATLEY BELIEVED SMALL FARMS COULDN'T COMPETE WITH LARGE ONES ON THINGS LIKE CORN AND POTATOES, BUT THEY COULD COMPETE IN OTHER WAYS, LIKE HAVING MEMBERSHIP CLUBS.

In 1982, he told reporters that his plan could make farmers $100,000 per year, and he later published a book detailing it. "The clientele membership club is the lifeblood of the whole setup. It enables the farmer to plan production, anticipate demand, and, of course, have a guaranteed market," he originally told *Mother Earth News* in a 1982 interview.

Whatley believed small farms couldn't compete with large ones on things like corn and potatoes, but they could compete in other ways, like having membership clubs. "You got to have a farmer who likes people and who has the knack of making that membership feel like his farm is their farm," he told *The Morning Call*.

He didn't believe farmers' markets would be competition because they were too expensive for most families. At both farmers' markets and grocery stores, the cost of picking and delivering produce is built into the prices. But with his membership clubs, cutting out the middleman saves everyone money. "The farmer now gets such a

small share of the housewife's food dollar. Under this plan, he gets it all," he told the paper.

Some farmers believed his plan would turn off potential members, because it would feel like farmwork. Whatley understood that not all farmers would embrace his ideas. "I'm not trying to change the spots on a leopard. I'm not wasting my time," he detailed in that interview.

But one person who didn't doubt his plan was Thomas Monaghan, the founder of Domino's Pizza and owner of the Detroit Tigers.

In 1984, *The Wall Street Journal* wrote an article about Whatley (PDF), introducing readers to another Alabama farmer who was using his methods with success. According to published reports, Whatley received a call that same day from Monaghan, who loved his ideas and wanted to begin a partnership to build a farm that would provide toppings for some Domino's franchises and also allow Domino's employees to join its Clientele Membership Club.

In addition to offering produce, the pair planned a catch-and-own fish pond, a place where members could also buy freshly slaughtered lamb, Christmas trees and more.

> OVER THE YEARS, WHATLEY REMAINED A SOUGHT-AFTER SPEAKER BECAUSE HE OFFERED A MORE HOPEFUL OUTLOOK THAN OTHER ACADEMICIANS AND POLITICIANS.

According to *Mother Earth News,* the Booker T. Whatley Farm at Domino's Farm opened in 1987. They planned it in phases and hoped their efforts would save 100,000 of America's small farms by 2000. Unfortunately, their complete vision never came to fruition because Monagah sold his stake in the farm, and its operations shifted from the original plan.

Over the years, Whatley remained a sought-after speaker because he offered a more hopeful outlook than other academicians and politicians, who believed there was no commercial success for small farmers. Whatley, who died in 2005, disagreed, arguing that, while the government favored large farms that grow soybeans, cotton and nuts, it could solve the problem by subsidizing small farms that grow more niche crops, like purple cabbage.

“The research money has gone to those money crops,” he told the *Washington Post.* “We all think for anything to be good it’s got to be big.”

The next time you buy produce at the Coop, please remember Whatley, whose legacy continues through the many CSAs feeding our neighbors.

Femi Redwood is a Murrow Award-winning journalist. For over a decade, she has worked in prestigious newsrooms including VICE News and CBS Newspath, holding a range of roles from on-air correspondent to department manager. She lives in Crown Heights with her wife, Julie, and their cat, Leo.

WANT TO TASTE BLACK HISTORY THIS YEAR? LOOK FOR SWEET POTATOES IN THE PRODUCE AISLE

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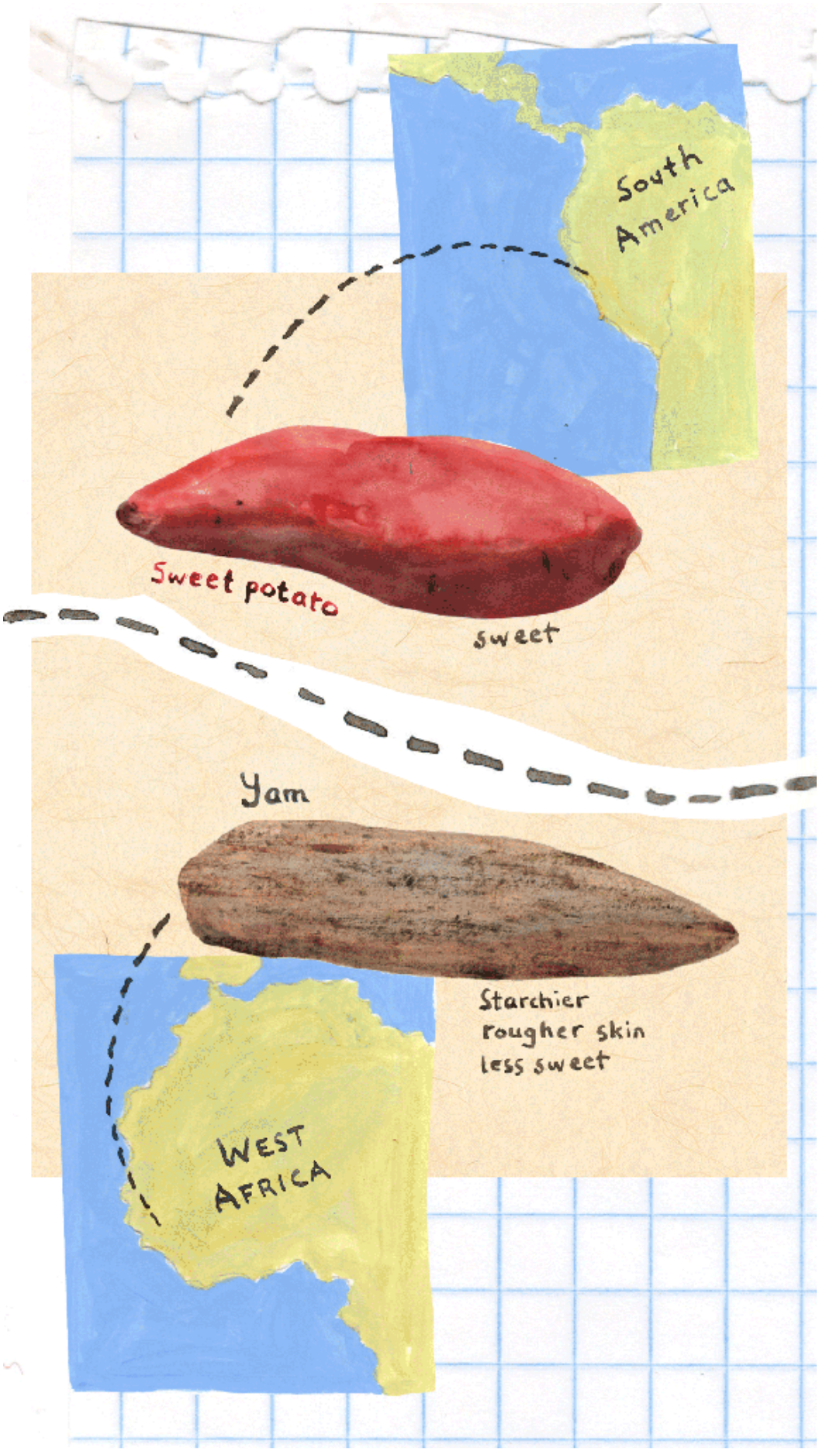
South America
Sweet potato
sweet
Yam
Starchier
rougher skin
less sweet
WEST AFRICA

November 18, 2025

By Femi Redwood

When I walk into the Coop's produce aisle and see boxes of sweet potatoes, I see more than a root. I see history. The sweet potato's journey began in South America, became a survival food for enslaved Africans in North America and later found a lasting place in Black culture. And while pumpkin pies may define the holiday table for some Americans, sweet potato pies are at the heart of celebrations for many Black families.

"Sweet potatoes are almost the way to determine whether it's a Black Thanksgiving or not a Black Thanksgiving," says Tonya Hopkins, a Brooklyn-based food and drink historian, spirit strategist and Coop member.

Yams and sweet potatoes are often used interchangeably, but they're different. Yams are native to West Africa whereas sweet potatoes originated in Peru. When colonizers arrived in the Americas, they began exporting sweet potatoes to Europe and Africa.

> AS TIME WENT ON, ENSLAVED COOKS PERFECTED SWEET POTATOES INTO FORMAL DISHES FOR WHITE FAMILIES. ENSLAVED FAMILIES ALSO ATE SWEET POTATOES, BUT AS A NUTRITIOUS NECESSITY.

English royalty loved them, including Henry VIII, who often ate sweet potato tarts. Sixteenth-century Jesuit writings suggest they believed sweet potatoes were aphrodisiacs, which may explain their popularity.

In West Africa, yams were part of a regular diet and were used in soups and stews. Hopkins says Europeans assumed Africans would eat sweet potatoes because they resembled yams, but that wasn't the case. Locals didn't like the taste and only ate the

green, leafy part. Africans who were shackled on boats or enslaved on plantations had no choice. “They were given the fleshy, starchy potato part as this food ration,” Hopkins says.

In America, wealthy colonialists often followed English trends, so they, too, requested sweet potato dishes. As time went on, enslaved cooks perfected sweet potatoes into formal dishes for white families. Enslaved families also ate sweet potatoes, but as a nutritious necessity. “Enslaved people often grew sweet potatoes in their own garden plots,” Hopkins said. They lacked the tools in their own kitchens to make a dessert, but they were able to roast or boil a whole potato over a fire.

BLACK FAMILIES CONTINUED TO TAKE CULTURAL OWNERSHIP OVER SWEET POTATOES AS MANY MIGRATED NORTH. THIS CONTRIBUTED TO SWEET POTATO PIES, ESPECIALLY DURING HOLIDAYS, BECOMING A DISTINCTLY BLACK AMERICAN FOOD.

After emancipation, Black families gained greater access to ingredients like butter and sugar and had more time to cook in their own kitchens. While pumpkins were staples in the North, sweet potatoes remained a staple in the South due to their ease of growth. In fact, scientist and inventor George Washington Carver persuaded Southern farmers to plant sweet potatoes to help them transition away from their reliance on cotton. He even published a sweet potato guide for farmers and cooks.

Hopkins says Black families continued to take cultural ownership over sweet potatoes as many migrated North. This contributed to sweet potato pies, especially during holidays, becoming a distinctly Black American food.

“Sweet potatoes are probably the most recognizable food source in the South during the fall in the Black family beside collard greens,” says Howard Conyers, a pitmaster, family farmer and moonshiner in Manning, South Carolina.

While many of us are disconnected from how our food is farmed, Conyers says he wishes consumers understood how physically demanding it is to farm sweet potatoes. He remembers collecting sweet potatoes as a child after they were harvested with a mule plow pulled by a tractor.

“We used to pick up like a quarter acre to an acre by hand in buckets,” Conyers says. Sweet potatoes sold in stores today likely come from commercial harvesters, he says, but those are still physically demanding jobs for workers.

Conyers, who studied agricultural engineering at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University before earning an engineering doctorate from Duke University, grows the same sweet potato seed his ancestors did. “It’s an old seed that’s probably been passed down almost a hundred years,” he says. He continues: “Maybe I’m tasting the sweet potato pie that my grandmother made or my great-grandmother made going back as far into slavery,” he says. He notes it likely tastes different from anything you’ve ever tasted because it’s made from heirloom sweet potatoes.

> MOONSHINE, LIKE SWEET POTATOES, IS PART OF BLACK HISTORY, THOUGH BLACK EXPERTISE IN THE INDUSTRY IS OFTEN OVERLOOKED.

But while there is reverence for the past, many, like Conyers, are experimenting with sweet potatoes in new ways. Hopkins says they are a “great muse” for experimenting with recipes. Conyers has replaced carrots with grated sweet potatoes in his mother’s carrot cake recipe and uses sweet potatoes to make moonshine, another staple of Black history and African tradition.

In 2020, he and his father opened Backyard Distillery, one of the few Black-owned moonshine makers. Moonshine, like sweet potatoes, is part of Black history, though Black expertise in the industry is often overlooked.

Hopkins says the roots of moonshine-making can be traced back to African traditions, and in America, Black folks in the South were among its key makers. It was used for both medicinal and recreational purposes. Hopkins adds that moonshine was also a path to economic freedom for many, including her own family. Her grandmother ran a speakeasy in Camden, New Jersey, during Prohibition and afterwards.

For Conyers, moonshine isn't just a business; it's a continuation of Black creativity and survival. "It should be the spirit of Black people in America. We talk about bourbon and this other stuff, but moonshine is just as important to Black America," Conyers says.

Conyers hopes to expand how he shares these innovation stories and he's optimistic about starting tours next year of his family farm and distillery. "I hope people will come down and see what we're doing at our integrated farm distillery," he says. "So, you can see how we're trying to use the whole ecosystem to tell the whole story of the South through Black people's eyes," he continues.

> "SWEET POTATOES WERE HARDY ENOUGH TO SURVIVE THE MIDDLE PASSAGE, PRACTICAL ENOUGH FOR ENSLAVED PEOPLE'S GARDENS AND VERSATILE ENOUGH TO STRETCH ACROSS BOTH PLANTATION KITCHENS AND FREEDOM KITCHENS," - SAID TONYA HOPKINS.

Based on what Hopkins shared, whether sweet potatoes are used in moonshine, pie, cake or any other dish, their botanical persistence and durability mirror the resilience of Black people. "It stores well through hardship and regenerates year after year," said Hopkins. "It was hardy enough to survive the Middle Passage, practical enough for enslaved people's gardens and versatile enough to stretch across both plantation kitchens and freedom kitchens. Its very durability and ability to reinvent itself made it much more than a survival crop."

Want to taste Black history? Try one of these recipes this Thanksgiving. We suggest using Beauregard or Jewel sweet potatoes for the best flavor. You can also use Garnet sweet potatoes, but your pie will be slightly less sweet. At the time of publication, all three of those varieties are available at the Coop. The Coop also carries Japanese, purple majesty and purple sweet potatoes, but those are not recommended because they won't give you the sweet, creamy filling and color of traditional sweet potato pie.

CLASSIC SWEET POTATO RECIPE

- 2 pounds of sweet potatoes
- 4 ounces unsalted butter, softened
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup evaporated milk
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- ½ teaspoon ground cloves
- ½ teaspoon ground ginger
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ½ cup packed brown sugar
- 1 9-inch pie crust

Instructions

- Preheat the oven to 425 degrees. Grease a baking sheet with your preferred oil or spray it with non-stick spray.
- Wash and dry the sweet potatoes. Pierce them several times with a fork, then place them on the baking sheet. Bake for 45 minutes or until soft.
- Remove the sweet potatoes and lower the oven temperature to 350 degrees.
- Once the sweet potatoes cool, peel and throw away their skin.
- Grease the pie pan with your preferred oil or spray it with nonstick cooking spray. Add the pie crust.
- Add the peeled potatoes to a large mixing bowl and blend. Add the softened butter and continue to blend. Add the eggs and continue to blend. Add both sugars and all the seasonings, then continue blending. Lastly, add the vanilla and evaporated milk and continue blending.
- Pour the filling into the pie crust. Bake at 350 degrees for 50 to 60 minutes, or until

the top is brown. You can also insert a toothpick or knife in the middle of the pie to check if it comes out clean.
- If your pie is done, remove it from the oven and let it cool for at least 30 minutes.

HOWARD CONYERS'S SWEET POTATO CAKE, MODIFIED FROM HIS MOM HALLIE'S CARROT CAKE RECIPE

- 1 ½ cup vegetable oil
- 2 cups sugar
- 4 eggs well beaten
- 2 cups flour
- 1 cup pecan
- 1 tsp salt
- 2 tsp. cinnamon
- 2 tsp baking soda
- 2 tsp baking powder
- 3 cups grated sweet potatoes (peeled)
- 1 tsp nutmeg
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 3 9-inch cake pans

Instructions for the cake

- Mix the oil and sugar, and beat well. Add eggs.
- Sift all dry ingredients, particularly the flour, two to three times. Add nuts and mix with the sugar mixture.
- Lastly, add grated sweet potatoes a small amount at a time.
- Bake in the pans at 325 degrees for 30 minutes.

Instructions for the cream cheese frosting

- ½ to 1 stick of margarine or butter
- 8 oz of cream cheese
- 1 box powdered sugar
- 2 teaspoons of vanilla extract

Mix all ingredients, beat well. Spread between layers and on the top.

If you want to support Hopkins' work and learn more about the intersection of food, drinks and history, you can join her Paetron platform.

To learn more about Conyers and his work and arrange a tour during your next southern visit, check out his website.

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