
Campti Field of Dreams

Donna Isaacs

EVERYTHING IN LIFE—both the good and the bad—prepares you for something yet to come. When I graduated from Miami Dade College, I received awards in Building Construction and Geology. When I was accepted to the University of Florida’s School of Building Construction, I knew that I wanted to build with the environment in mind. After graduating with my Bachelor’s in Construction Management, I began to take courses toward my Master’s with a concentration in Sustainable Construction. While I didn’t complete the degree program, courses such as Construction Ecology, Historic Preservation, Urban Planning, and South Florida Ecosystems have shaped my work.

At the University of Florida, I took the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design exam to become a LEED Accredited Professional (AP). Shortly after that, an opportunity arose for me to begin teaching LEED Exam Prep Workshops with Dr. Charles Kibert, internationally renowned for his work in green building. Somewhere along the line, I realized that even if every new building were constructed to the highest level—LEED Platinum, we still would not have a sustainable built environment. Influenced heavily by Roy Eugene Graham and his work in historic preservation, I saw that sustainable development has to address the existing built environment, and if we did it in a way that focused on cultural heritage, we could foster that sense of place that makes people want to live, work, and play there. Hence, my Master’s research focused on combining green building with historic preservation into “green rehabilitation”—a tool for sustainable community development.

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Finding home

My path to Campti started with the Great Recession of 2008, which devastated the construction industry in Florida. On January 1, 2011, I moved to Natchitoches, Louisiana. One day in spring 2014, I visited the Campti Historic Museum to learn about the history of nearby Campti. I will never forget the warm welcome Clara Silvie, the curator, gave me, nor what she said, “I have been praying for you!” When I returned to the museum, the quilting frame had been relocated, and a desk area



Re-use of the City Bank as the Campti Historic Museum illustrates adaptive reuse of existing infrastructure.

was cleared for me. So began my mission-driven life in Campti, population 1,057.

I was prepared! My passion for sustainable development has been half a century in the making and is strongly influenced by those formative years long before learning the term sustainable development or trying to grapple with the complex concepts encapsulated in the meanings of each of those words and their combination.

Born and raised in the rural community of Fairy Hill, in the northeast parish of Portland, Jamaica, I had what would have been considered a normal middle class childhood. My father, Kenneth Wright or affectionately “Maas Ken,” was a residential contractor who served many terms as a Member of Parliament and Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture. My mother, Sylvia Wright, was the Nurse Anesthetist for the Port Antonio hospital. A Registered Nurse, who was trained in Leeds, England, and worked in Toronto before returning to Jamaica to marry my father and establish a very cosmopolitan lifestyle (at least for that time). After being told, “No Wright wife works!” my mother proceeded to seek and accept a position at the Port Antonio Hospital. My brother and I are the products of two very strong, opinionated parents.

Together, our parents created a rich environment for us to learn and thrive. Long before I learned the terms sustainable development and permaculture, I lived it. Our home was on less than 5 acres (2 ha) and was not considered a farm. However, at any time, it was home to approximately 24 laying hens, 1,200 boilers (300 chicks every two weeks), 100 pigs, plus a couple of cats and dogs. A variety of fruits and vegetables grew year-round, including but not limited to ackee, avocado pear, bananas, plantains, breadfruit, cerasee, cho cho (chayote),

cherries, grapefruit, coconuts, june plum, mangoes, otaheite apple, star apple, pawpaw (papaya), peppers, sweet sop, sour sop, sugarcane, callaloo, okra, yellow yam, white yam, dashene, injun kale, tomatoes, and star fruit. Pineapple, pumpkins, watermelons, cucumbers, and peanuts often supplemented these perennials, but no major seasonal plantings were ever conducted. Seeds were just thrown out. We did not own a tractor, and no tilling was done. Our house was on the hill, and down on the main road was a saw mill, cabinetmaking shop, small store, and a St. John Clinic where first aid was available. Across the street on my uncle's property was a one-room school that my brother and I attended between the ages of two and four. Beside the school, on about two acres, was the old house in which my grandmother and grandfather raised their ten children. After they passed, my father (the last of the ten) purchased it and turned it into another woodworking shop and a small block factory. Surrounded by family and friends, within walking distance to four beaches (Fairly Hill, Dragon Bay, Blue Lagoon, and San San), this mixed-use, mixed-income community in rural Jamaica was my living laboratory.

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In the 2011 Kauffman Thoughtbook published by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, Nicholas Donofrio, retired Executive VP of Innovation & Technology at IBM, where he worked for 44 years, points out, “The innovation that matters now—the innovation that we’re all waiting for, even if we don’t know it—is the one that unlocks the hidden value that exists at the intersection of deep knowledge of a problem and intimate knowledge of a market, combined with your knowledge, your technology, and your capability... whoever you are, whatever you can do, whatever you bring to the table.”

Donofrio suggests that we start, not with the solution, and what we want to accomplish, but with the problem and what needs to change, and then start thinking about how to change it.

My interest in sustainable development, and more recently sustainable agriculture, has brought me in touch with the teachings of third-generation alternative farmer, author and sought-after conference speaker, Joel Salatin. He wrote *You Can Farm*, and I didn’t just read the book, I believed him! In one of his lectures available on You Tube, he empowers future farmers

by sharing his own personal philosophy, “Anything worth doing is worth doing bad, first.” He points out that it is in the doing that we learn. He encourages future farmers to fail, fail frequently, and learn from their mistakes. The path to creativity, innovation, and eventual success is to try. I learned this as a child: “Try, try, try again,” when success was never about what grade you got or the outcome achieved but, “Did you try your best?”

So here I am in Campti, empowered by Salatin and Donofrio to use the knowledge I’ve accumulated to positively impact the way we live, work, and play in this tiny community. None of this is new, profound, or proprietary; and I admit being biased by the paradigm of my childhood in Jamaica and adulthood in the US. I forewarn you that where we are today is a compilation of failures or rather, missteps. We are not THERE yet, wherever THERE is, but every day I wake up, I’m blessed with an opportunity to TRY to improve the quality of life in rural Louisiana.

A brief history of Campti

History remembers well the Lewis and Clark Expedition funded by President Jefferson to explore the Louisiana Purchase in 1806. Few are aware that Jefferson funded two expeditions. The ill-fated Freeman and Custis Expedition (aka the Red River Expedition) began in Campti. It was halted by a large force of Spanish troops, in excess of 1,000; however, they were able to document the flora and fauna in the region and survey the river.



One of our completed, mini-hugelkultur beds

Even more noteworthy were the interactions with the Caddo Indians. The Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia notes, “These discussions laid the groundwork for increasing American control over the American Indians of the Red River region.”

In documenting The Great Raft—possibly the largest logjam in the country, expanding over 160 miles (250 km) from Campti to Shreveport—Freeman and Custis provided the War Department with valuable information and in 1833 Captain Henry Miller Shreve was contracted to clear the logjam to open up the Red River for commerce.

Campti’s brief entry into the Civil War was devastating. As Union soldiers retreated down the Red River, they burned the entire town, leaving only a house that served as the hospital and the Catholic Church up on the hill. However, Campti was resilient, and the town rebuilt. On November 2, 1902, the Village of Campti officially came into being with the signing of a proclamation by Gov. William Heard. The Village grew quickly, and the Campti Historic Museum is currently located in the former bank, built in 1911, the first bank in Natchitoches Parish which was outside the City of Natchitoches.

Once, Campti was a bustling community with many stores, markets, saloons, and doctor’s offices, plus a post office and a mill. Like many other rural communities, Campti was a mill town. On November 30, 1956, the mill burned down. An article on the devastating impact of the fire in the publication *Forests & People* noted, “an industrial plant with 50 workers to a community creates the following: 25 more school children, 50 more passenger cars registered, 2 more retail establishments and 56 more householders. Conversely, the disappearance of such a plant should eliminate just as many.” Campti never quite recovered from the fire, even though another mill was eventually built nearby. Campti is still an industrial town, as International Paper operates a factory on the Red River. The Natchitoches Port is also only about five miles outside the municipal limits.



Mini-hugelkultur bed with small-diameter wood from clearing and thinning the land. Hugelkultur is an ideal combination with high tunnels, for year-round growing with reduced irrigation needs.

Breaking new ground

When I moved to Campti, my interest was in the built environment. The two-story brick building that housed the Campti Historic Museum was deteriorating, the nearby hardware store had fallen in, and once beautiful homes were overgrown or neglected. However, it was hard to talk to people about fixing their homes when they were struggling to stretch their budgets just to buy food. One Thursday morning each month, a line would start forming around 7AM at the Food Bank, for a box of staples with very little in the way of fresh fruits and vegetables. Providing access to affordable fresh fruits and vegetables was where my work in Campti began.

We began the Campti Community Garden on 3 acres (about 1.2 ha) with a 5-year lease from Doris Carries. It was

Within 60 days of signing our lease, the community garden flooded for the first time in decades.

across the street from his home, and while it was close to the river, he mentioned that it had not flooded since he’d been there. The soil was rich. We used conventional tillage practices and supplemented with cottonseed, blood, bone, and kelp meals. Later, we added feather meal, dried molasses, dolomite lime, and compost tea with molasses and fish emulsion. We supplemented seeds from Baker Creek with seeds from the local Valley Co-op. We were not organic, but we kept it as natural as we thought possible, staying away from synthetic herbicides and pesticides and using only Bt and organic preparations. The harvest was bountiful. Our first summer, we grew and sold \$3,000 worth of vegetables and donated about the same amount. That fall and winter, we started selling greens to the local Save-a-Lot grocery store in Natchitoches. Volunteers assisted with planting and harvesting, and it was incorporated into the Campti Community Development Center’s After School program so that students could participate. By the following spring, I’d learned a lot: the havoc Colorado potato beetles can unleash in a short period, and the importance of planning, starting early, succession planting, and crop rotation—but Mother Nature had her own lesson to teach. Toward the end of May 2015, the parish issued a State of Emergency because of flooding due to heavy rainfall. The garden flooded with approximately 9 ft. (3 m) of water and looked more like an alligator park than a community garden. This turned out to be the first of three floods in a 12-month period, then again this spring. The community garden has not been planted since. This was an emotionally difficult period, but I walk in faith.

Fortunately, just months prior, while talking to a couple in

the community garden, we started to discuss what we could do if we had more land, like add livestock. They mentioned they had land and asked how much I would need. On my 50th birthday, we signed a lease agreement to develop a 25-acre (10-ha) Sustainable Agriculture Demonstration Farm. Within 60 days of signing, the community garden flooded for the first time in decades.

What I failed to mention is that this new site was not flat land and definitely not very rich bottomland. This was acidic, sandy soil that had not been worked since the previous owners passed away. The land needed to be cleared, but we had no money, and the tract was too small to encourage anyone to cut it for the timber or even pulpwood. Then a chance meeting got me on a list of projects that the Central Texas Conference Youth in Mission would undertake in Natchitoches Parish. That Friday, the entire group converged on the farm with the intention of clearing an area for the outdoor classroom so that we could begin our work.

That same week, Waylon Breaux also joined me. Having worked in a greenhouse for five years, he was willing to volunteer full-time for three months until we could get the farm up and running, at which time he would be hired. Three months has turned into three years, and Waylon has become an invaluable partner. Growing up in rural Louisiana, his childhood had prepared him for everything we were doing on the farm.

Now I had help, but there was still one major barrier to actual production. Other than the creek that runs when we have heavy rainfall, we didn't have any water. We were approximately 1.25 miles (2 km) outside of Campti, so municipal water was not an option. We needed a well. Fortunately, I had shared my idea for the farm and my interest in outreach to historically underserved farmers and ranchers to folks at the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). I learned about the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) that provides a cost-share for implementing environmentally beneficial practices. I applied for a well, cross-fencing, and season-extending high tunnels.

As with any federal program, the process involves submitting an application, a review process, allocation of funds, due diligence, and finally actual award and implementation. The process took over a year, and the first year I was approved only for the high tunnels. This meant no well. I was faced with growing produce on poor soil with no water.



Donna Isaacs signs the lease agreement for the farm on April 1, 2015.

Reducing irrigation needs

Our goal for the farm is to reduce inputs by a factor of ten when compared to conventional farming systems. This means that our inputs from off the farm will be no more than 10% of a conventional farm. We are nowhere near there yet, but I love big, audacious goals! While it is our intention to become certified organic (or beyond organic) in both vegetable and livestock production, we will not begin that process until next year because we just got our well in October 2017. We will use 2018 as our base year and then begin our transition in 2019. In the interim, we're focused on building our soil to improve production.

Between Geoff Lawton's videos and *Sepp Holzer's Permaculture*, building hugelkultur beds seemed to be the best approach to improve the soil and retain moisture for vegetable production. Because we had to cut down the trees, haul manure, and make compost, we decided to build 16 4'x8' (1.2-2.4 m) beds that were only about 18" (45 cm) deep as opposed to 4-6' (1.2-1.8 m) mounds. To begin, we dug down one foot and removed the soil. Then, we added several layers of logs. We placed a layer of manure on top of each layer of logs. We were not very particular about the wood, so it ended up being a mixture of hardwood and softwood up to 6" (15 cm) in diameter. Horse manure was the most convenient manure in the area, so mucking out our neighbor's stall was an almost



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Put pigs where their constant rooting disturbs the ground you want to be disturbed. They make great rototillers!

daily chore. We built compost piles and covered the wood and manure with a layer of compost 4-6" (10-15 cm) thick. Then, we covered everything with the soil we had dug out at the start. When completed, it looked like a regular raised bed. The first year, we planted tomatoes, peppers, squash, cucumbers, and corn in hugelkultur beds. Despite the potential for wood to tie up nitrogen, we received good yields through July, then lack of water took its toll in August. That said, we were pleased with the results, so we built 8 4'x25' hugelkultur beds inside the first of three high tunnels. This high tunnel was originally designated for perennials, but we have planted a little bit of everything in there, and everything has thrived.

While the soils are fungally dominated, and our tomatoes grew and produced well until the tomato hornworms took over, we have not been able to carry them through the winter. I read Elliot Coleman's book, *The Winter Harvest Handbook*, and plan on growing seasonally appropriate crops in the winter. We were actually pleasantly surprised with the interest in broccoli, cauliflower, spinach, kale, beets, turnips, mustard, spring mix, and stir fry mix during the winter months. Occasionally, a customer will ask for tomatoes or cucumbers in winter, but that is extremely rare.

We're going into our third year outside and our second year inside the high tunnel, and the wood is still there. It's decaying much more slowly than I would have expected in our hot, humid climate. Earthworm production has increased exponentially. When we tap on a bed with a rake, earthworms pop up everywhere. Rabbits are my biggest challenge on the farm. I have had to put chicken wire around the bottom of the high tunnel to keep them out. They will eat all the broccoli, cauliflower, and brussels sprouts down to the ground.

My experience with tomatoes in hugelkultur beds in the high tunnels is that the combination provides good healthy production without the need for additional fertilizers. Granted, I did layer generously with manure and finished with compost before replacing the soil.

I do till. I plan to till with a tractor before building the permanent 30" (76 cm) beds, then I will use a tiller until I can

purchase a tilther (a special tiller for surface tillage only, to prepare seedbeds) and tarps. As soon as finances will allow, I will get a BCS two-wheel tractor and attachments for the market garden. I struggle with weeds, but the chickens in their Justin Rhodes-esque Chickshaw (abundantpermaculture.com) is a win-win-win. They weed, fertilize, and provide eggs. Our pigs on pasture also do quite a bit of land clearing and fertilization. The goats and sheep are working through the thicket, and hopefully by the end of the year, we'll have our cross-fencing in place and can do some intensive rotational grazing. Eventually, I hope to go to the regimen that J.M. Fortier uses with silage tarp and flame weeder.

Cover crops are great when you have the equipment to manage them. While they would boost the soil, we have not incorporated cover cropping. We've done limited seeding for forage, but I will tend to agree with Joel Salatin that you're better off letting the birds do the seeding for you. This spring, I've seen a lot of vetch, crimson clover, and partridge pea showing up all over the farm.

A lesson learned: we killed our first batch of 25 broilers at 10 weeks and averaged 6-6½ lbs. (2.7-2.9 kg). My second

My work here has just begun.

batch of 25 broilers was killed at 9 weeks and averaged 6½-8 lbs. (2.9-3.6 kg). I had no explanation for the difference, until a little research into weeds revealed they were eating high-protein partridge pea. Had I known, I could have removed/reduced their feed. There is a learning curve in sustainable agriculture, but it is worth it for the health and well-being of your family, friends, and community.

My work here has just begun. Our upcoming conference, "Back To Your Roots," May 17-19, 2018, featuring Joel Salatin, J.M. Fortier, and Dr. Chuck Fluharty will lay a foundation for the "adjacent possible" as we focus on growing food, farmers, and the fabric of our rural communities. In June, we will host a two-week youth agripreneurship summer class and an Art & Agriculture Festival. For more information, visit our website, CamptiFieldofDreams.org. The opportunity to TRY to improve the quality of life in rural Louisiana has provided me with a rich, full life, and I am truly blessed. So I will leave you with this: TRY! The worst thing that could happen is that you FAIL, which is simply an opportunity to LEARN and TRY AGAIN! Δ

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