

Down to Earth

Land prices are skyrocketing,
but solutions are on the horizon.

BY JILL GLEESON



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Cameron Terry, right, farms on land pieced together across a number of backyards in Roanoke, Virginia, including the one above, where he's growing 1/10 of an acre of fennel, turnips, lettuce, collards and garlic. Like many other young farmers, his goal is to scale up, but finding affordable land is easier said than done.

CAMERON TERRY FARMS VEGETABLES on about a third of an acre across four backyards in Roanoke, Virginia. He grows salad greens in the spring and fall and focuses on produce such as tomatoes, cucumbers and okra in the summer. He has been doing it for about four years—and successfully, too. Cam sells enough to restaurants and through the local farmers market that he can envision making farming his life's work. But he also knows the time has come to expand his operation on land he either owns or leases long term. The goal, he says, is to establish a home base for his business so he “can hire people and pay them a fair wage to grow food for their community.”

The issue Cam keeps running into as he works to make his dream a reality is the price of land in Roanoke. He says it varies wildly but can run as high as \$80,000 an acre. “Land prices are ridiculous,” he says, “and I think they are marketed for a different customer. So when a piece of land that would be suitable for me to grow vegetables on

goes up for sale, the listing is made for someone who's going to develop it into 20 or 40 condos, and the cash flow of that operation dwarfs what my little farm is going to be able to do there. And then how do you finance it? Even if we could afford what they say they want on a per-acre basis, who's going to lend you that kind of money to do something that's going to pay back that price over 150 years?”

Cam's problem isn't unique. According to Holly Rippon-Butler, land campaign director for the National Young Farmers Coalition, land affordability is the single biggest challenge that young and new farmers and ranchers face. The reasons for this disturbing situation are complex, but one factor is the massive competition agricultural producers confront when buying land. Developers and other non-farming buyers can often pay much more per acre (sometimes far above asking price), buy sight unseen or even pay with cash. Though this issue came to the fore about a decade ago, the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated conditions as many urban residents of means fled cities for (literally) greener pastures.

And while land prices have been rising steadily, the average age of farmers has risen nationally as well. For every farmer under 35 years old, there are more than four who are 65 or older. “And because the average

age of farmers continues to go up,” Holly says, “we expect millions of acres to change hands in the coming decades, which puts a lot of land into the marketplace—but not necessarily in the hands of young farmers.”

“According to USDA research, of all the land that's expected to change hands, a very small percent is expected to be available to farmers outside of the family. ... In general, there are fewer and fewer farmers and less and less land. Farmland is being lost at a really alarming rate.”

AMONG THE STATISTICS swirling around the issues of land ownership and affordability, few are as troubling as this: While the National Agricultural Workers Survey found that more than 70% of all farm workers identify as people of color, according to the latest Census of Agriculture, more than 95% of U.S. farmland is white-owned.

Jerry Ann Hebron, executive director of the Oakland Avenue Urban Farm and an organizer of the Detroit Black Farmer Land Fund, is one of a growing number of folks who are working to bridge that gap with arable urban land. For Jerry and others, land loss is personal. “In my family, land was stolen from my grandfather,” she says. “He lived in rural Tennessee, and white people ran him off of [his land]. And that happened all over the country.”

Last year, Oakland Avenue Urban Farm partnered with two other organizations in the city—Keep Growing Detroit and D-Town Farm—to offer land security to Detroit farmers of color. From Juneteenth of 2020 to June of this year, they raised roughly \$100,000 to help some 30 urban farmers buy the vacant lots they had been farming. The group's 2021 campaign is now underway, and they are intent on helping another 40 producers this time around.

“We are continuing to fundraise, but we are being very intentional about this work,” Jerry says. “This money is to purchase land, and now we are looking at how to purchase equipment to create a tool and equipment share. The need is very, very large.”

If this state of affairs sounds worrisome, that's because it is. Ian McSweeney, director of Agrarian Trust and founder of Agrarian Commons, says the situation has “reached a point where it's financially near-impossible for next-generation farmers to get on land

or for farmers to continue to afford land.” But with great challenge comes great opportunity, and there is a wealth of organizations at work on the issue. They include both the National Young Farmers Coalition and Agrarian Trust, as well as American Farmland Trust. These groups are addressing the crisis in myriad ways, such as lobbying the federal government for help, setting up community land trusts that lease farmland affordably, and building better connections between farmers and landowners.

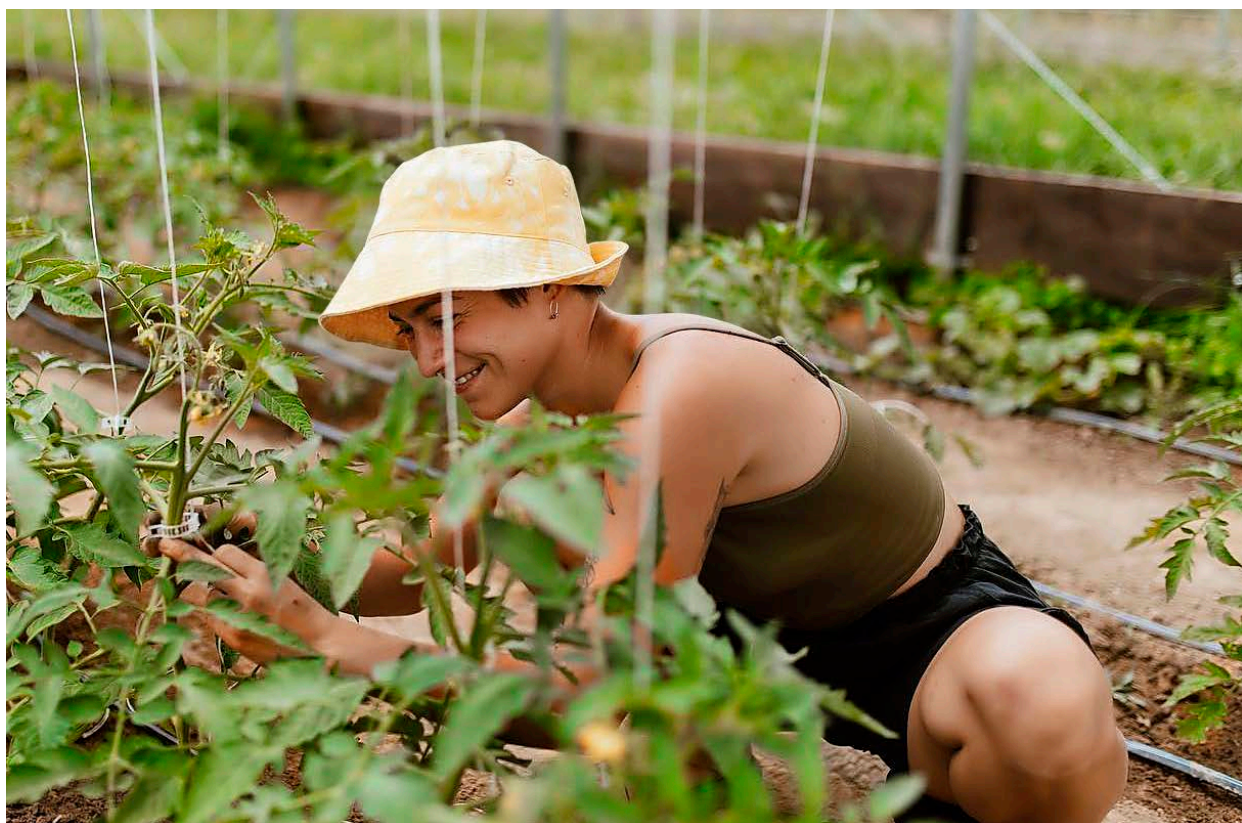
“[Farmers are] so inventive and inspiring, with fresh, creative minds, and the amount of adversity they're able to overcome—that's why I don't lose hope.”



THE NATIONAL YOUNG FARMERS COALITION is tackling land affordability from an advocacy standpoint, bringing the voices of their membership to the halls of power, as well as researching and proposing various solutions to the crisis. Currently, the organization is focused on pushing the USDA to improve credit access for young farmers by allowing the Farm Service Agency to preapprove land-ownership loans. They are also lobbying for changes to the capital gains code that will incentivize land transition to young farmers and farmers of color. “In terms of the Farm Bill, which is coming up in 2023, we are really zeroing in on the need for a massive investment from

Farmers from across the United States met in Washington, D.C., in 2019 as part of a farmer fly-in organized by the National Young Farmers Coalition. The group was there to advocate around the farm bill appropriations process.

LEFT (2): CAMERON TERRY; RIGHT: NATIONAL YOUNG FARMERS COALITION



Natasha Keating is a volunteer at New Roots Community Farm in Fayetteville, West Virginia. The Agrarian Trust is working with the West Virginia Agrarian Commons to purchase this land and preserve the farm.

Congress that results in more equitable access to farmland in transition,” Holly says.

As this pivotal work goes on in D.C., Agrarian Commons has centered its mission around changing the way farms are owned, so ag producers can get onto land and stay there. “We are a national land trust focused on supporting next-generation farmers,” Ian says. “What we’re doing is bringing ownerships of farms into nonprofit community land trusts and then we’re conveying affordable, secure, long-term lease tenures to farmers. We launched this model for holding land in May 2020, and we’ve incorporated 12 of these community-centered agrarian commons land trusts in 10 states across the country. So now we’re in the process of transferring farms and raising money to acquire farms to transfer them into those agrarian commons.”

And then there is American Farmland Trust (AFT). The wide-reaching organization offers programs aimed at helping farmers access land. Among their most successful projects is Farms for a New Generation National Initiative, which gives guidance on critical topics including what farmland ownership looks like and what kind of financial resources are needed to be able to purchase or lease land. Meanwhile,

the AFT’s Empire State enterprise, called Farmland for a New Generation New York, features a centralized resource center to connect farmers seeking land with owners wishing to sell, as well as to provide support around issues regarding ag land acquisition. To date, 200 farmers have found farmland through this program, while 15,000 have accessed technical assistance.

“Multipronged solutions are needed,” says Megan Faller, program manager of AFT’s Farms for a New Generation. “We need advocacy at the federal, state and local level. And we need communities that are invested in building local food security—and that looks like securing a land base that new farmers can come onto and also helping the senior generation transition out in a dignified way.”

After a pause, Megan adds, “I was an aspiring farmer. I did it for a decade and just couldn’t find land, so I’ve been on that side of it. I’ve also been lucky to be able to do some interviews with farmers. They’re so inventive and inspiring, with fresh, creative minds, and the amount of adversity they’re able to overcome—that’s why I don’t lose hope. Because we’ve got this amazing group of people who are really working to make it work.” **R**