

# A History of Gaia Gardens from Four of Her Farmers

By Joe Reynolds

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From a newcomer's perspective, it is hard to imagine the dense and diverse history of the 5 acres that make up Gaia Gardens. Owned by the East Lake Commons Homeowners Association (ELC), Gaia Gardens is a tucked away jewel in the East Lake neighborhood of Dekalb County. Gaia is a quintessential, well-constructed and thoughtful meditation on how an organic, diversified production farm sits in the context of an urban community and neighborhood while giving respective representation of the life of the farm, woodland, and pond areas with its boundaries. Essentially, it harbors an oasis of plants, animals, insects, and microorganisms giving weight to the idea that biodiversity is the masterplan for success on Planet Earth. Additionally, and as importantly, it provides delicious, seasonal, organic, nutritious, and interactive food to the ELC community and many good folks in the Atlanta area. This year Gaia Gardens will celebrate 15 years of this good food work by honoring its farmer partners, founders, champions, and all of the helping hands and mouths.

**RYAN COHEN:** Much like the representation of a seed, it is hard to see what potential can be unraveled and grown from the ideas, imagination, and sweat equity of folks. Beginning in 1998, an idea that had been contemplated by a few people germinated into an active, productive, and working urban farm under the care of Ryan Cohen, a soft-spoken young farmer who had spent time on farms in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Ryan had made a Southern move to Atlanta to follow his then-girlfriend, now-wife, who was studying at Emory University. "It was really hard to imagine this would be successful." There was much work to be done on the property, according to Ryan, and in the shadow of a bulldozer leveling land and a background of houses being built, he was beginning with a hand rototiller and a couple of garden tools. "We started off from square one."

The first goal was get the farm up and going and begin a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, something very familiar at ELC and in the Atlanta area food network today, but unheard of by most at the time the Gaia CSA began. It was a marketing and community model that Ryan had learned and seen in his previous farming experiences. Additionally, another goal was to create a self-sustaining farmer salary from proceeds of sales of food from the farm. At that time, the farmer salary was pay-rolled as part of the development budget. Some of the challenges that Ryan faced were access to irrigation water, a lack of equipment, growing a diversity for the CSA market, and developing techniques to maintain the breadth of paperwork required for organic certification.

However, the local food and farming movement was nascent, and excited for a young enthusiast to take on an urban farming challenge. "I always felt like somewhat of a rock star." One amongst many inspiring stories of Ryan's time is his fruitful encounter with Jane Fonda. She had come to the farm to ask Ryan questions about growing and to gather information for her daughter's future farming plans. Ryan, unaware of who he was talking to, gave a farm tour and provided examples of his work with Gaia. While leaving, Jane Fonda, introduced herself and told him that her foundation funded projects like the farm. From that meeting, Gaia applied for grant funding to build the current greenhouse and dig and install our 300-ft deep well. Ryan also initiated some of Gaia Gardens first interactions with the good food community, becoming a state representative for the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group. All in all, Ryan reflects, "We created a lot of excitement of what could be done...I am proud of the community for making it happen."

**DANIEL PARSON:** Daniel Parsons arrived at Gaia Gardens in 2004, a year after the departure of Ryan, and after the tenure of a hard year which saw the early exit of the second Gaia gardener. "It had been a year since Ryan left, and they had not had a good year with someone new...Meanwhile, I had all these ideas in my head about how to structure a farm." It was the interview workday that made a huge impression on Daniel. "Several people were there...and we seeded cover crops in the big upper field. I was impressed by the community involvement and the infrastructure and field setup." Daniel had already had experience working on an organic farm in Dawsonville and had just completed a Masters' Degree in Plant and Environmental Science. Daniel quickly began to define several features of the farm that make it intensely productive through neat organization into a 12-year rotation on 1.5 acres. He also introduced new

facets of the farm model which included shiitake mushrooms, honey beehives, and a multitude of perennial plants including figs and a blueberry orchard. "Planting the blueberries was the biggest project I undertook."

In addition to bringing the CSA count up to 60 or more members, Daniel returned to the Morningside Farmers' Market, where Gaia had previously sold under Ryan. According to Daniel, he got his chops running a business, learned how to talk on camera, cut his teeth on keeping equipment running, and gained a tremendous amount of experience as an educator, providing internship opportunities and workshops. He also continued and enhanced the food community interaction of the farm by stepping onto the Georgia Organics board, helping with Team Agriculture Georgia, being a Terra Madre delegate, taking a leadership role in managing the Morningside Market, and becoming a reputed farm consultant. "The community support was key in helping me to reach outside of my little farming operation and have an impact. The fact that I was in the city meant that anyone could come visit the farm and see what it was all about." 2008 saw Daniel's last year at Gaia before moving with his wife to Clinton, South Carolina. He was honored at that year's Georgia Organics' Conference with the Land Stewardship Award by the membership, the board, and Michael Pollan. "I think Gaia provides a model for others to follow."

**RACHEL TALİ KAPLAN:** Having had experience with Daniel and Gaia Gardens, Rachel Tali Kaplan was a natural selection for the helm in 2009. "I started working with Daniel Parsons in the Spring of 2006 as his first intern and I stayed on through the end of the year." Rachel additionally stayed connected to the farm and community by subscribing to the CSA as a working member. "I fell in love with Gaia." Rachel moved the marketing model closer to home and heart, becoming deeply connected to many CSA members, and bringing the farm to the East Atlanta Village Farmers' Market. "In a deep way ELC models what a community can do to support local food and grow the small-scale organic farming/farmer movement." In addition, Rachel began a new trend in the relationship for compost feeding stocks, collecting vegetable scraps from the deeply missed Dynamic Dish. "Farming takes a village." "I credit my accomplishment to the support of the Gaia community...who stood by me every step of the way." With a renewed desire to farm close to her family and alongside her husband, Andy, Rachel moved to Boston, Massachusetts at the end of 2010. "Gaia is a tangible, urban example of community supported agriculture that transcends trendiness as it is rooted in the collective desire to manifest true and lasting change."

**JOE REYNOLDS:** My time at Gaia Gardens is still in the making and has been forever forged by my work and respect for Crystal Organic Farm and the Glover Family Farm, as well as those Gaia gardeners that preceded me. I always make the joke that I have inherited the right to steward "turn-key" operations. Along with my sweetheart Judith, we have embraced our CSA, the East Atlanta Village Market, our great restaurant friends, and a desire to grow good community through supporting Slow Food Atlanta, Wholesome Wave Georgia, Community Farmers' Markets, and Georgia Organics. We also deeply stand by educating new and emerging farmers in an effort to increase and empower our ranks.

So what's the total value of a 15-year small farm in East Lake? It would be tough to quantify the number of CSA shares harvested or the number of market or restaurant customers served through the years. I see 67 units of homeowners preserving and supporting a 5-acre piece of land that has been and will remain productive, interactive, ecologically conscious, and revolutionary, as well as 3 farmers that continued to farm after their farm time. Additionally, there are 2 daughters, 1 son, 2 wives, 1 husband, 1 sweetheart, a new tractor, and an amazing audience and supporting cast of workers, members, volunteers, customers, and true community. Daniel posited it best on the night that he received his Land Stewardship Award. His sentiment that night often resonates in my psyche and heart as a true panacea for our time. We do not own land forever, but can only steward and love it in our time.

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**Joe Reynolds**

***Gaia Gardens/Love is Love Farm***