



SOUTHEAST

TRANSITION TO ORGANIC PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

June 2026

TRADING PLACES: TONYA CRYER SWAPPED HOLLYWOOD SETS FOR ORGANIC GROWING IN RURAL LOUISIANA

Tonya Cryer of Cryer's Produce surveyed her 1-acre green patch sitting on family land in Mt. Herman, Louisiana. Tucked between overgrown chickweed and dandelion, she discovered eggplants and peppers that made a harvest she thought went unproductive. It was 2025 and her first attempt at no-till farming.

"This is my experimental year," Cryer told two staffers of Black Farmers Index (The Index), who walked the land with her. "I am still trying to figure out organic farming."

Cryer was introduced to the Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) in 2023 at a farmers meet-and-greet, workshop and farmers market hosted by The Index in Lafayette. The workshop was led by Dr. Dana Nettles, who owns a farm specializing in medicinal herbs and local produce.



Dr. Nettles, who is both a farmer and pharmacist, informed the group of growers about her preparations to submit her application for USDA organic certification. During her presentation, she outlined the steps involved in the certification process and shared her extensive experience working towards achieving this credential. Ultimately, Dr. Nettles successfully received her certification in March 2024.

In 2024, Tonya decided to establish a USDA certified organic farm. To do so, she had to swap out a career as a hair stylist in Hollywood for agriculture, all the while, fast-track her growing skills. The farm would sit on family land she shares with her father and brother. In whole, she estimates that if all her family's properties were included, it would be "a country mile."

For a year she traveled to-and-from California and Louisiana to make the major move. Finally, settling



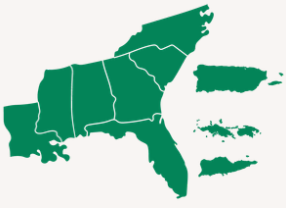
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on the Cryer farm, she saw her first work would be to help expand the family operations long overseen by her father, Mr. Alton Cryer, and her brother, Tony Cryer. As an educator, she began to enroll into agricultural classes given by local universities and AG organizations. Combing state and federal programs for information and resources, Tonya learned about ways to enhance operations. From attending more markets to seeking out grants, she cultivated a network of agriculturalists, extension programs and organizations that introduced her to best growing and business practices.

During this time, Tonya shadowed her father who built a reputation of being a coveted local grower. Known as “the Watermelon Man,” every year he sells out of his award-winning sweet and delicious melons. Cryer detailed a list of successful yields since that day she inspected the half-grown garden: cucumbers, watermelon, eggplants, okra, peppers, collard greens, onions, and herbs such as mints, thyme, oregano, corn and basil.



However, Mr. Cryer is a row crop farmer who uses conventional methods. Since she elected to carve out her own niche as an organic farmer, she looked for guidance from other avenues and scored. In a 2024 grower’s program, she learned that TOPP had a mentorship initiative and was encouraged to join. Initially familiarized with TOPP when she attended the Black Farmers Index workshop a year before, she readily agreed.

In 2025, a member of the Chickasaw nation served as Tonya’s TOPP mentor.

As she learned more about organic harvesting, Tonya gravitated towards no-till farming. “I do believe that we need to take care of our soil better,” said Tonya who resolved that she had to search for more assistance in mastering a novel growing technique. This also included seeking resources from the



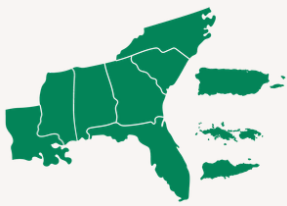
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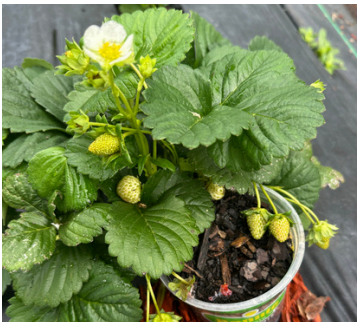
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Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS). Currently, she is taking the steps to acquire a hoop house and other growing resources to build the farm.

Eager to continue transitioning, in 2025, The Index reconnected Tonya to someone who she met at the beginning of her introduction to TOPP: Dr. Nettles. Since The Index had their initial TOPP workshop in Lafayette in 2023, Dr. Nettles faithfully attends the virtual meeting with Louisiana farmers. Moreover, she serves as The Index’s farmer-expert in the region who speaks at TOPP events. It was at one of the meetings that Tonya recounted her unsuccessful growing season. Committed to the environmentally sound no-till methods and organic growing practices, she asked for assistance. Similar to other requests from farmers, Black Farmers Index came up with the idea of peer mentorship initiative for TOPP.



In 2026, Tonya was the first to sign up for “Office Hours with Dr. Nettles.” Today, Dr. Nettles is finishing her third year of certification, and still speaks on the process. Designed as a technical assistance session, Dr. Nettles’ one-on-one meetings walk participants through certification, while providing strategies and methods to successfully apply for USDA organic certification. At the meeting, Tonya and the veteran farmer engaged in a training that covered bookkeeping, soil health, climate change, pest management and weed control, and of course, no-till farming.



Tonya is determined to gain the certification. She also wants to grow non-traditional produce such as soursop, to boost profits. By garnering the certification, her focus on specialty, exotic produce shows promising business opportunities. Now every morning, rather than making 5AM production call times to a Hollywood studio, Tonya wakes up just before sunrise to walk the rolling lush terrain of her family’s land. Often, she thinks about how to preserve farming traditions and continue to sell harvests like her kinfolk have been doing for over 100 years.