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GINGER, SPICE AND EVERYTHING NICE IN SUGAR CANE COUNTRY: NICOLE JOHNSON AND TREY LIVELY ARE TURNING THEIR ORGANIC GROWING PRACTICES INTO A LOUISIANA STAPLE

Article by: Black Farmers Index

Nicole Johnson and Trayvonic “Trey” Lively saved every dollar and dime for years to purchase a 2-acre farm in New Iberia, a sleepy agricultural hamlet in Southwestern Louisiana. Their goal is to continue to harvest and sell specialty crops, but on their land, L4S Farms. While their ultimate credential is to have an operation that is USDA certified organic.

For years, Johnson and Lively leased land in the Acadiana region of Louisiana. On it, they grew ginger, turmeric, and other medicinal herbs. From their yields, they sold freshly harvested produce and made value-added products such as salves, facial oils, teas, soaps, and infused honey. With a growing customer base, quickly, they grew out of their plot in Scott and started a plan to relocate.



Johnson is the co-founder of Fightingville Fresh, a weekly farmers market in the Fightingville district, one of the most concentrated food deserts in Lafayette. She is an active voice in farm communities throughout the state and works on a number of initiatives to boost food access and farmer success in Louisiana. Tapping into her network, she found out about a family selling land. It was in in sugar cane country, but the farmland remained unused for over 50 years.

Around the same time in 2023, the couple attended a farmers meet-and-greet, TOPP workshop and farmers market hosted by Black Farmers Index (The Index). Ironically, it was down the street from Fightingville Fresh farmers stand.

The workshop portion of the day was led by Dr. Dana Nettles, a USDA organic certified grower who owns a farm in Alabama. For her operation, she specializes in medicinal herbs and local produce with an emphasis on teas and other value-added products. Dr. Nettles’ similarity to Johnson and Lively’s business piqued the couple’s interests.



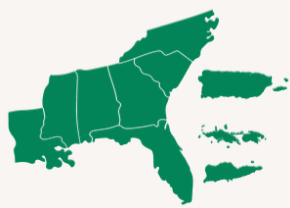
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At the event, they also met Konda Mason, who was preparing for USDA certification like Dr. Nettles. This sparked conversation on the need for more farms in Louisiana to obtain the credential. Johnson and Lively told the attendees they were already using organic methods and had planned to carry that out to their newfound land. But, like many other growers, their concerns were the costs of the process, its fiscal sustainability, and their ability to fully understand the process so that they could certify favorably.

“Going to the events of that day had put in our mind that we were going to certify, and that we could do it. It was really the first time someone broke down the process to us, and we could talk to someone face-to-face about it,” said Johnson.



In 2024, Johnson signed up for the TOPP mentorship as she and Lively were in the final stages of acquiring their land. Lively, who is the green thumb of the operation and sells at the market, learned about the process of certifying organic from their mentor. Because their estate was untouched, a faster route to certification was to certify the raw land. However, they wanted to retain their customers and expand the business, so they sought advice from growers and those offering technical assistance.

At a virtual meeting with Louisiana farmers, Johnson shared with the group that she and Lively were deciding on how they wanted to proceed with the certification. Namely, should they start growing and delay the process, or certify immediately. In the talk, several options were offered, such as them certifying a portion of their raw land, while working on the other. Yet, time would be the deciding factor. Their initial projections of how long it would take to move their farm operation were off by months. So, they started farming and used the growing community of organic and regenerative farmers in the area, including the mentor.

Later that year, Johnson and Lively attended The Index's TOPP event, “Night in NOLA,” which featured an urban farm using organic growing practices in an area that suffered environmental issues due to the historic 2005 storm, Hurricane Katrina. At the event, which hosted over 30 growers, they reconnected with Konda Mason, who shared that she, like Dr. Nettles, received her USDA organic certificate. This gave the couple hope as they worked with their mentor.



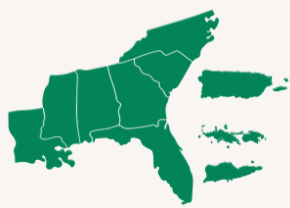
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In 2025, to boost their commitment to organic they have been working with Florida Organic Growers for more technical assistance. They also sought resources from the Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS). They asked for help to build composting bins on their land to reduce paying for organic fertilizer, and to maintain the integrity of their land as much as possible. While they are still working to meet the requirements of the program, Johnson and Lively still attend The Index's quarterly virtual meeting.



In 2026, Johnson signed up for a one-on-one, peer mentorship program launched by The Index called, "Office Hours with Dr. Nettles." The sessions link transitioning and curious-about-transition farmers with private technical assistance trainings given by Dr. Nettles. One of the main thrusts of Johnson's enrollment was to receive strategies on how to carry out a no-till farming plan during transitioning. This includes understanding the OMRI list, accurate bookkeeping, and ways to ensure all materials used are within the acceptable parameters of USDA organic certification.

"We grow our medicinal herbs and have now moved to produce, so it is important for us to continue offering fresh, healthy food," explained Johnson to The Index.

Johnson remains active in the farming and food communities of Louisiana. While she says her path to USDA organic certification is taking a longer route, taking time to learn about all of the nuances in the process is worth the wait.

What steps have you taken in the transitioning process?

"Since we already grow using organic practices, it is now the process that goes into applying for it and paying for the application. For the last 3 years, I've attended workshops and programs to understand better growing practices, and specifically, what it takes to become organic certified. While I do know the benefits, we are seeing how we can afford it and grow our farm. However, I regularly read and research about the process and talk to farmers in the area."

-Nicole Johnson



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