



OASIS ON BALLOU
Dorchester, Boston, MA
Apolo J. Cátala
Participant in
“Deepening Roots, Growing
Success” 2018

Farmer History

Apolo J. Cátala had been practicing law in community and economic development for nearly 30 years when he went back to his homeland of Puerto Rico for a visit. He looked at his lush green surroundings and wondered why 85% of the food consumed there was imported rather than grown on the island. “This,” he said to himself, “makes no sense.”

A career community advocate, Apolo says it soon became crystal clear to him that local agriculture was, in itself, a vital form of advocacy.

Thus began Apolo’s fight against food insecurity, a fight that brought him to the central Dorchester neighborhood of Boston. Today, as manager of the half-acre OASIS on Ballou Avenue Urban Farm, he grows and distributes produce. Apolo is primarily assisted by a small group of interns — all men of color reentering the workforce after incarceration.

Apolo always had a green thumb, but to get where he is today, he realized he was going to need substantial training (juris doctor notwithstanding!). In 2015, roughly a year after his Puerto Rico epiphany, he attended the Urban Farming Institute (UFI) in Boston, and participated in an intensive farm education program — working six days a week in the field and in the classroom.

Subsequently, Apolo met Dorothy Suput at a farming conference in Worcester, MA. From that moment, he says, “everything continued falling into place.” He enrolled in The Carrot Project’s nine-week course, “Deepening Roots, Growing Success,” designed to strengthen business skills for farm and food business operators. **Here he realized the importance of understanding and caring for the “engine that drives the farm operation,” i.e. the business.** While non-profit, urban farms triple or quadruple their bottom lines with social and environmental contributions, Apolo says he needs his farm to also be sustainable by traditional financial measurements so he can continue to reach his intended markets, so it

Farm Snapshot

Apolo grows diverse vegetables on a half-acre plot in Boston with help from formerly incarcerated men of color, and sells his products locally to provide access to fresh food in food deserts.

Innovation

Apolo says, “We all should be doing something to take care of our precious planet. Urban farming—any local farming that focuses on and values nutritious food grown in a responsible way — contributes to individual, community, and environmental wellness. If we can all contribute to that, we will all have lived a good life. That is my philosophy.”

was critical to learn the nuts and bolts of analyzing profit and loss assumptions and how to price produce to ensure business solvency.

Multidimensional challenges reap multidimensional rewards

Ballou Farm is a beehive of activity, and Apolo, even more than the average farmer, contends with multiple priorities competing for his time in the garden and in the office. In the field, he's teaching interns and volunteers, tending crops, and endlessly tweaking his sowing calendar to yield a continuous supply of lettuces and other succession crops to distribute among his many markets. There is a small farm stand every Thursday in season right at the farm; he also sells produce weekly at the Codman Square Farmers' Market. Apolo also brings produce by cargo bike to OASIS's parent organization, the nearby Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation properties, which comprise over 1,000 units of affordable housing. In 2020, he plans to expand this approach to creating better food access via a mobile farmers' market to areas often called "food deserts", now preferably referred to as "healthy food priority areas".

In addition, during the 2019 season, Ballou Farm started a new collaboration with UFI and the Dorchester Food Coop (DFC), providing produce for a small pilot CSA. The collaboration was very successful and will be expanded in the 2020 season. Apolo also occasionally teams up with a restaurant or a pop-up chef series, as an opportunity to get the word out about the work at Ballou Farm.

In the office, with the principles he honed in The Carrot Project's "Deepening Roots" class, Apolo keeps a careful eye on all of the production challenges and marketing channels, evaluating and balancing, to make sure everything works towards the farm's triple bottom line. A farm operating solely for financial viability would hire experienced workers rather than untrained men with a potential multitude of challenges, but providing work and training opportunities for members of a vulnerable population supports OASIS on Ballou's overarching mission. At the same time, the farm does need to remain financially viable to carry out its mission, so it is a prodigious balancing act for Apolo.

Apolo networks actively with other urban farmers to expand collaboration opportunities and amplify each another's work. He would like to engage in concrete planning and conceptualizing, so that urban growers could work together to supply their markets with high demand products such as collards, okra, and callaloo, an amaranth indigenous to South America. With a more formalized network, farmers could also provide ready outlets for one another's surplus.

And then there are the infrastructure projects: Apolo will lead a team in the installation of a new hoop house, which will solve the challenge of starting seedlings (currently grown in a variety off-farm greenhouse spaces), allow for better timed succession crops, and extend the

production season so that OASIS on Ballou can offer crops earlier in the season and participate in winter farmers' markets.

On the horizon: Limited space, limitless impact

OASIS on Ballou is a very small farm that serves a growing population. Apolo needs to produce more and more food in a very limited growing space. To comply with a City of Boston by-law, and to avoid growing in potentially contaminated soil, he grows on raised beds which means reduced square footage. These beds are built atop a thick layer of woodchips (around 10 truckloads to cover the entire property), covered by a layer of geotextile fabric and another layer of woodchips that needs to be refreshed every year with 3-5 additional truckloads full. An onerous process, this was still less expensive than the alternative of excavation and remediation. The growing space is further limited by the fact that about half of the garden's footprint is on a steep incline. Zoning requirements preclude terraced beds, so Apolo is working vertically, growing anything he possibly can on trellises, and using companion planting and other intensive growing techniques to take advantage of every square inch. Meanwhile, he is studying up on "living wall" concepts and designing a structure that he describes as "essentially a fabric shoe rack" on which herbs and flowers can be grown.

Customer education is another opportunity to expand the reach of OASIS on Ballou. Apolo says it "breaks his heart" when he competes with the grocery store down the street that offers a hybrid tomato for \$1/pound. Helping potential customers understand the advantages of a locally grown tomato to their health and the local economy is a priority.

Apolo says the multidimensional nature of urban farming is a response to a multidimensional challenge. "At the end of the day," he says, "the actual yield from the half acre of the Ballou Farm is only going to have a small impact — even if it were 20,000 pounds — but **when we engage people to make the connection between food and wellness, inspire them to have gardens and become more effective stewards of the land and our environment,**" the impact is limitless.