



SEEDHEADS TRANSCRIPT (ENGLISH)

Episode 7: PATERNE MIRINDI and JEAN-PHILIPPE VÉZINA

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Hugo Martorell // Jean-Philippe Vézina // Paterne Mirindi

Hugo Martorell:

Hey, welcome to SeedHeads, the cross-pollinating podcast where our Canadian seed heroes tell their stories, share their how-to tips, and talk about the seeds they love. I'm your host, Hugo Martorell, live from Tiohtá:ke-Montréal, on the traditional unceded territories of the Kanien'keha:ka nations. Today, we are talking with two growers who specialise in tropical vegetables. They are Jean-Philippe Vézina, owner of Les Jardins Lakou in Dunham, and Paterne Mirindi, director of the Groupement volontaire pour le développement rural durable nord-sud, based in the Centre-du-Québec region. In this episode, they explain how they came to grow vegetables from Africa and the West Indies, the challenges of finding seeds and varieties, and how they came to collaborate in new projects.

I now turn to you so you can introduce yourself and share what motivated you to get into agriculture. Jean-Philippe, would you like to start?

Jean-Philippe Vézina:

Yes, sure. Hello and thank you for having me. My name is Jean-Philippe Vézina and I am a grower and a social entrepreneur. I am the founder of Les Jardins Lakou, a small vegetable farm located in Dunham, in the Brome-Missisquoi RCM in Montérégie. I bought the site in 2019. My first marketing season was in 2020 and I specialize in vegetables, herbs and small fruits that are used in typical African and

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West Indies dishes. Some of the special varieties I grow on my farm are oca, some squash varieties, namely the Giraumon squash, chilis and amaranth, which is called Lalo in Haïti, but in this case it's the African amaranth. I also grow other vegetables: tomatoes, cucumbers, celery, broccoli, kale and Swiss chard. As much as possible, I want ingredients that will allow people to grow whole products. My goal is really to immerse people in the West Indies gastronomy through the products and recipes I offer them. This year, I am launching a new app that will give people access to recipes, culinary tips, short tutorials and of course, addresses where they can find the ingredients to prepare the recipes. It will be useful for people that are originally from Africa or the West Indies, or for people born in Quebec that wish to make exotic discoveries.

Hugo Martorell:

What will be the name of the app?

Jean-Philippe Vézina:

It will be called RAHA, R-A-H-A. It's a word that comes from the Swahili, a language spoken in Africa, that means comfort, happiness, and pleasure.

Hugo Martorell:

In the name Les Jardins Lakou, what is the origin of the term Lakou?

Jean-Philippe Vézina:

It comes from Haitian Creole. Jardin Lakou means a garden in the yard. It refers to a peasant farmer tradition in Haiti. The Jardins Lakou were the gardens that the slaves started to grow, mostly in the mountains, after the Independence. It serves the livelihood of the people because they grow flowers and vegetables, and wood to build materials. So, through Les Jardins Lakou, I really want to bring forward the Haitian cultural and gastronomical traditions, and allow people to reconnect with their roots and heritage.

Paterne Mirindi:

Hi! My name is Paterne Mirindi. As Hugo said, I am originally from Congo-Kinshasa. There are two Congos: Congo-Brazzaville and Congo-Kinshasa. So, I'm from the East. I became interested in agriculture because I am the son of a villager. Both my parents and I grew up in the village, and I really like agriculture. When I finished my studies here in Québec, I thought I had to do something, because Québec welcomes a lot of immigrants and when I visited the tropical markets in Ontario and in Quebec, I noticed that the Africans who owned a tropical market really had difficulty sourcing exotic vegetables. They could find some, but it took a long time to

get them here, with all that that implies. The ongoing pandemic has really taught us a lesson and shown that we were right to have started this project.

In 2013, I decided to introduce tropical vegetables, vegetables that grow in Africa, in a warm climate. But I needed to know if it was possible to produce the same vegetables here in Québec, where we have a harder climate and not a lot of warm temperatures. I needed to really use adequate methods and to do a comprehensive study to discover the timeframe in which those vegetables could be grown.

It started in 2013 and we are now in 2021. The summer season hasn't started yet, but we are growing about 10 vegetables: sorrel, amaranth, eggplant, African spinach, squashes and their leaves, beans and their leaves, and the potato leaf, because it's edible. We're at 10 vegetables right now. As we always say: "Eating is intercultural, and eating is intergenerational." That reality has caught up with us. I started this project with my team hoping to grow those vegetables and make them accessible to the communities. The project was born through an initiative created by an organization that I run and cofounded with some friends in 2008, when I was studying for my master's degree. We wanted people to be able to have those vegetables on their plate, fresh vegetables, but we were also curious scientifically to discover if they could grow well here, and if so, how to grow them. That's what motivated us to start the project and I think it's evolving nicely.

Hugo Martorell:

Jean-Philippe, you also have another project called Réseau Lakou, or Project Ujima. Can you tell us more about that?

Jean-Philippe Vézina:

Yes. One of the reasons I started Les Jardins Lakou is that it was important to me that it also had a social mission. I really want to facilitate the relationships between vegetable growers and food processors, and community organizations, restaurant owners, mainly in the Montréal region, and people that are part of the African and West Indies diaspora. Like Paterna mentioned earlier, the goal was to improve the procurement of fresh and local products, while also addressing the health issues that affect African descendants. Diabetes is a major issue, like cardiac health, hypertension, and obesity, which results from the fact that newcomers forgo the food they ate in their country of origin to adopt a North American diet that has a big impact on their health. I submitted a proposal to the McConnell Foundation and received funding that allowed me to develop the Ujima project. It has three main goals. The first one is better networking between various agri-food players from the African diaspora. The second one is to offer training programs and accessible

information about food and health. That's why I'm launching the RAHA app that I mentioned earlier. It's part of this project. The third goal is giving people the chance to connect with nature and with the land, mostly for those who live in Montreal and can rarely go outside of the city. A series of visual workshops will take place on the farm, if it's possible, depending on the pandemic. If it's not possible, the series will take place in 2022. There is an educational component, as well as a kind of internship on the farm, which I'm organizing in partnership with Charity Jeunesse. Eight young people between the ages of 10 and 25 will do a two-week internship on the farm focused on eco-construction and sustainable agriculture.

Hugo Martorell:

Thank you Jean-Philippe. Paterne, you're familiar with this type of project, because the Groupement volontaire pour le développement durable rural nord-sud works to educate and engage families that are part of the African diaspora. Would you like to tell us more about the work that you do, the visits in the field and the relationships you are trying to establish with the African descendant community in Québec?

Paterne Mirindi:

We noticed that a lot of Africans were already settled here and that they had a big problem finding vegetables from their country of origin. We decided to create this project to help communities access those kinds of vegetables. We organize what we call awareness sessions to inform people who come to the farm about the importance of the project and to talk in length about the vegetables. We also, and that was before the pandemic obviously, organize tasting sessions. So, we have a stand with information on the vegetables and a stand to taste the vegetables. We do that in partnership with the Jardin Ricard, from which we rent our land. We also received invitations from people who called us, like volunteering centers, to ask us to explain the project and ask what our vegetables are.

We saw the exchange we were creating between the communities who welcome immigrants. But immigrants themselves come to really understand why the project was created. When I gave interviews to RDI and TVA, it was thought that this project was important or became a major factor to convince immigrants to settle in the region. We wanted to verify this, and we did see that creating this project around tropical vegetables here, in the Mauricie region, was convincing immigrants to leave their region and settle here. People from Winnipeg and Calgary came to live in Mauricie. Currently, more than four families came to live here because they could not accept having no access to the vegetables of their country of origin. They grew up eating those vegetables and the fact that they were available here was a positive

factor. There really is a link between this project and immigration here. I think that's very positive.

Hugo Martorell:

Thank you Paterne. If I understand correctly, you're both trying to fill a gap in demand. You're trying to fill a gap in the demand for products from Africa and the West Indies. Do you think the supply is being built gradually, or are there still major gaps to source these niche vegetables here in Québec? Jean-Philippe?

Jean-Phillipe:

Yes, there is absolutely a market to grow, in Québec and in the rest of Canada, in terms of changing demographics. More and more first or second-generation immigrants are living here, and as Paterne explained, they are very attached to their gastronomy, no matter where they come from, or how many years ago they immigrated. These people want products, products from the West Indies or Africa. They can find some in the tropical industry.

The major problem is the lack of freshness and taste, and that's why it's important to find as many cultivars as possible than can adapt to the climate here, so we can offer very local products. It's even better for health and environmental reasons if they are grown organically. These are all issues. So, the big task is really crop adaptation to build knowledge around the plants that can be developed and grown here in Québec. There is also the matter of managing distribution. We're talking about micro scale, but how can these products become accessible to a larger public? I think Paterne and I are currently pioneers in Québec's agricultural market. There are very few vegetable growers who own their farm and offer that kind of services. I think it's possible to develop that market, because there is a clientele for it, whether it's African descendants or people born in Québec or Canada that have traveled and are looking for those flavors. I really believe there are good business opportunities to pursue, and a network to build.

Hugo Martorell:

Yes, there is also the tropical farm in Outaouais and the Jardin d'Éden in Estrie, both in their first year of activity, who are trying to respond to that demand regionally. How to access those products is intricately linked to where you find your seeds. Do you find them in catalogs of big seed companies? Or do you have to find other sources to be able to plant those seeds so they can bear fruits and those fruits can be sold? Paterne, you did a lot of work related to variety trials and breeding parent plants to produce seeds. Do you want to tell us a bit about your experience in Trois-Rivières producing seeds of African varieties?

Paterne Mirindi:

So, yes, we started with the idea that there is no harvest without seeds. We wanted to be self-sufficient. I think the pandemic created more problems, but we were already in a good position to select our own seeds at the farm and use them the following season. In Trois-Rivières, we started a few years ago selecting our own seeds, for eggplant, amaranth and other vegetables. We have a packet of seeds that we are experimenting with. We source our seeds that way.

This year, with SeedChange, we thought a structure should be put in place to frame that work. We created the trials so growers could access our seeds. We started with eggplants, and maybe more varieties will follow later, more vegetables. This year, we are experimenting with eggplants. We are experimenting with several varieties. Participants in the trials are currently working hard. I think the season has started and it's going well in the greenhouses. Since February, we have been growing our own seeds and it's going very well. I think SeedChange deserves a mention, because it allowed us to gather and get to know each other. Before, we were working alone, in silos. We didn't know each other, and it helped us launch a project that has a common goal: promoting seeds, for eggplants now and maybe more vegetables later. We are very determined.

Hugo Martorell:

Doing your selections over the last few years, what changes have you noticed in the field in terms of yield?

Paterne Mirindi:

Usually, when the seeds came from Africa, they had difficulty adapting to the climate at first. Whether starting seedlings in the greenhouse or in the field, two weeks could go by without germination. I knew there was a problem in terms of climate, but today, with our own seeds, it takes about a week or a week and a half maximum to germinate. We have well-adapted varieties right now. We produce the seeds. We can offer eggplant seeds and plants. It's going very well.

Hugo Martorell:

Good news. Jean-Philippe, I understand your experience sourcing seeds is a bit different than Paterne. When you started, where did you look to find seeds?

Jean-Philippe Vézina:

For me, finding seeds meant doing a lot of research on the Internet. For some products, I could find local producers, mostly for chilis and oca. Local suppliers already existed for these. For the rest, I did a lot of international orders, with the

risks that come with it in terms of quality. It's almost impossible to know if the seeds are from this year, or two or three years ago. Germination is not the same all the time. Being able to produce our own seeds with time, and those seeds having adapted to the local climate, that is really very interesting for me as a vegetable grower. The best thing is to be as self-sufficient as possible when it comes to seeds.

Hugo Martorell:

The bitter eggplant, the African eggplant is not a vegetable originally from the West Indies, right Jean-Philippe? Is there a vegetable that you would like to promote for its importance on both the cultural and culinary level, and that you think would sell well?

Jean-Philippe Vézina:

Yes, when it comes to the specialties of the West Indies, there are some important ones that can be grown locally and that I want to develop. Ocra is one, because it's very common. There are also some squash varieties, namely the Caribbean squash that is largely used in West Indies dishes, as well as amaranth, or Labo. I would like to also specialize in chayote, a vegetable that looks like a fruit and grows like a vine. I would also like to grow passion fruit locally. I already mentioned chilis and there are also herbs I want to grow, like cilantro, ginger, thyme, and other aromatic herbs that are used to prepare dishes. It's a cuisine that focuses on spices. I want to get various chili flavors that represent various regions: Brazilian chilis, West Indies chilis, Scotch Bonnet, and Cayenne Pepper. Finally, peas and beans are largely used in the West Indies.

Hugo Martorell:

Is sweet potato part of those vegetables?

Jean-Philippe Vézina:

I forgot that one, but yes, sweet potato. The one with orange flesh is called yam. The real sweet potato is the one with white flesh, but here in Québec, they are all called sweet potatoes. But in the Caribbean, people distinguish the two. That's a plant that could adapt here. It has a long growing season for sure, but it could be produced and sold in Québec.

Hugo Martorell:

Paterne, can you tell us more about African eggplants? There are eggplants of different colors, different origins, and different shapes. Can you demystify the African eggplant for us?

Paterne Mirindi:

At first, I wanted to work on the paradigm of agritherapy. I'm not sure if you're familiar with it, but it's the reason I thought of introducing new vegetables that have antioxidants. The eggplant is one of those. It has nutritional and medicinal value. There are several varieties and different shapes. There are also several colors. But an eggplant is an eggplant. What is interesting is not only the shape or the color, but the variety and the taste. Some are slightly bitter, some are bitter while others are very bitter. The African eggplant I'm interested in has many virtues. One of those virtues in terms of antioxidants is the skin, which is a gold mine. It's a gold mine because it helps fight cancer. It's very rich in Vitamin C and Vitamin E. Eggplant contains what is called belladonna tincture. People suffering from stomach-ache should eat eggplants regularly. It helps. Eggplant is also good for diabetes. It can even prevent it. Whether you eat it raw or cooked, eggplant offers lots of nutritional and medicinal values.

Hugo Martorell:

Paterne, how many varieties are you testing in your greenhouse or in your field this year?

Paterne Mirindi:

We're experimenting with 16 varieties with the network we built to do our trialing project. So, I have 16 varieties on my farm.

Hugo Martorell:

It's going to complicate the tastings come harvest time. Do you have a favorite recipe or a way of preparing eggplant that optimizes its taste?

Paterne Mirindi:

Personally, I like to eat it raw, but others like it cooked. We can fry eggplant in oil and combine it with other things, like we do with amaranth. It can be cooked with beef or fish or eaten on its own. It can be sauteed in oil with a bit of salt and eaten like that. Let me tell you, during the four years we did tastings at the Jardin Ricard in Louiseville, we would have plates with various tastes. The plates came back empty because the Québec communities that welcomed us really liked it. That was the goal. To make it accessible. The recipes make it a bit complicated. We will have to work on that also, to help people find the recipes they want.

Hugo Martorell:

Jean-Philippe, I have another question for you. When starting a farm, there is a series of steps to follow. In Québec, we're privileged, in the sense that we have

access to agronomists and financial tools. I was wondering if you have any advice for young people originally from Africa or the West Indies that would like to work in agriculture? Where should they start? Could you maybe share your experience starting a farm?

Jean-Philippe Vézina:

Yes, absolutely. The first thing to do for anyone who is interested is to get some training and work at least one season as an aide or a worker for a vegetable grower to discover the reality of working on a farm. The work should be done with a grower who has a lot of experience. That way, they can have a good idea of what it implies. I'm passionate about what I do, but the work is not easy. It comes with a lot of constraints. The work is done outside and is very physical, etc. So, take time to see if you like it before starting a business.

When the time comes to start the business, it's crucial to be well surrounded. I focus on that a lot. They should see their project as a business and not a hobby. The way they think about their project is important. It should be able to generate revenues, as well as pay wages and expenses. It really should be seen as a business. They should take time to get entrepreneurial support, to create a business plan and make projections. That's how I started. And I think that's also how Paterne works.

It's difficult to have access to land. Prices are high in Québec. Especially when growing on a small area, we need the... The big farms that are on the market need smaller land. Renting is a good first step. That's it. Get expertise from people who have experience, like Paterne, Edem or me, people who are working already and who have started clearing a path for African descendants and that type of product.

However, I really encourage people to go for it. I think being a grower is under... it's not often presented as an interesting option to people, particularly immigrants. But it's good to get first or second-generation immigrants to settle in regions. Agriculture is a good option to consider. It can provide a good quality of life when done correctly. And you can feed your family and your community. I strongly encourage people to learn about it and follow that path.

Hugo Martorell:

Paterne, would you like to add something?

Paterne Mirindi:

Yes. I want to say that it's not easy. I grew up in agriculture. I remember my mother when I was a baby.... I would like to pay tribute to my parents and grandparents who

taught me about agriculture. I didn't learn about it here. I learned when I was still a baby, when my mother would take me to the fields. Agriculture made me who I am today. How do you explain that a mother who didn't go to school but only tended to her small field could send her child to university? Do you see? That's a potential that should be jealously guarded. Agriculture can help you find work and position yourself in life.

These days, the people, the volunteers that come to our fields to learn or to help also learn French. Our farm has become a place to socialize and to get immerse into French. I remember not so long ago, I got calls from two volunteers who told me: "Paterne, we will miss speaking French because we're back now, since there is no work in winter, but we like speaking French in the summer." They had difficulty speaking French, but after working at the farm, they can now speak better. That helps to understand the validity of the kind of agriculture we're doing.

Hugo Martorell:

I was wondering what your mid-term vision is for the future, in terms of project, of dynamic collaboration between growers that are part of the African diaspora?

Jean-Philippe Vézina:

For the 2021 season at Jardins Lakou, the goal is to be able to supply most of the products we want to offer to people through our baskets. In terms of collaborations, we want to continue building the solidarity network that allows for more fluidity in the supply chain, from farm to table. I work a lot in the Greater Montreal region, but I encourage everyone to build their local network, to bring awareness to African descendants about their heritage and culinary traditions, and to encourage them to discover life on the land.

As for the mid-term vision for Les Jardins Lakou, it's about working on the missing piece in all of this: the distribution network. It's about federating a few vegetable growers and food processors to implement infrastructures that will facilitate transport and distribution, so that more restaurant owners, community kitchens and community centers can have access to fresh and local products, or products that are appealing in terms of the diversity found in Montréal. The goal is really to change our idea about local procurement. It shouldn't only be about products traditionally found in Québec, but about everything that can be produced locally, that can be grown locally and offered to a population that is more and more diverse, but also more curious, culinary-wise.

Hugo Martorell:

Paterne, do you want to share your mid-term vision for the future with us?

Paterne Mirindi:

Yes. We share the vegetables that we produce with the communities. It's the reason the project exists, to break that long distance with the vegetables grown in Africa. All the African communities that are already here will share our vegetables. Like Jean-Philippe said, we will also supply seeds to some people who want to try to grow two or three plants at home. Like you said earlier, we're planning an event in May to give away some eggplant seeds or seedlings. It's time for us to be completely available for our communities so they can have access to their vegetables.

In terms of operational goal, as you know, I started in 2013 with 50 plants. This year, I will have 3000, not counting the trials we're currently doing together. I have 3000 plants of eggplant. If each plant gives minimum three kilos of fruit, imagine what can be done. That's where we're at. We will be producing around nine tons of food for our communities. Nine tons of eggplants. It's really something! That's our operational goal for the year. Last year, I produced seven tons of amaranth. That's also something. Like Jean-Phillipe just said, we want to be completely available for our communities, and we are asking the population to be there for us. That way, it will be an interaction. Because it's the interaction between them as consumers and us as growers that matter for the joint production of food and goods. [laughter]

Jean-Philippe Vézina:

Show up and we will also show up through it all.

Hugo Martorell:

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