



Sarah Beck: You're listening to *Garden Futurist*. I'm Sarah Beck, here with Adriana López-Villalobos. Hi, Adriana.

Adriana López-Villalobos: Hi, Sarah.

Sarah Beck: Adriana, today we're making space for the social and cultural aspects of horticulture as an experience—and we want to honor the role of individual voices in sharing their experience.

Our guest today gives us a first-person account of what it's like to be a Black woman experiencing barriers and racism in our own horticulture field.

Adriana López-Villalobos: This is a special topic, and it resonated with me. As a Latin American woman and an immigrant to Canada, as a graduate student and a woman in science, I know how difficult and how important it is to see yourself represented in your community—in your workplace—but also have the right environment to thrive.

Sarah Beck: We spoke with a garden futurist who is working to amplify the voices of underrepresented communities in mainstream garden media, specifically the Black community.

Colah B Tawkin is a mother, gardener, and the founder and host of the podcast and media platform known as *Black in the Garden*. She describes herself as an advocate for Black people trying to reconnect with the land and talks about plants with vigor and volume.

Adriana López-Villalobos: These are conversations we have to have and I'm so grateful Colah was willing to share that with us. I hope our listeners are as excited as we are to have the opportunity to learn about her experience, and the things we can do in our communities to become aware of these issues: representation, equity, and inclusion.

Sarah Beck: So glad to talk to you.

Colah B Tawkin: Happy to be here.

Sarah Beck: I want to jump right in. Early this year, you founded a nonprofit called UnderGround Arborist. The mission is to plant native trees in every state in the US.



You're prioritizing urban spaces—especially low-income neighborhoods—that generally have fewer trees. What are the current barriers that you're seeing to achieving what's recently being referred to a shade equity issue?

Colah B Tawkin: UnderGround Arborist is just so meaningful to me for so many reasons, because it's addressing many issues all at once. And when it comes to shade equity, the barriers—just to get straight into the answer to what you asked—is barriers that have been there already. Historically, it has been proven that in neighborhoods that I am targeting, they've been redlined. Trees have intentionally not been planted as robustly as they've been planted in more affluent neighborhoods. And there is absolutely a correlation between the demographic of the type of people who reside in these types of neighborhoods being the underserved, less affluent neighborhoods and there's Black and brown people there.

The biggest barrier is related to the demographic issue, which is Black and brown people—it's discrimination. There's no other way I can put it.

And when I say discrimination, I don't mean as intense and blatant as say, Rosa Parks being asked to move to the back of the bus. I mean, it is a little bit more subtle. I'm getting asked a lot more questions. I think about Ketanji Brown when she was getting qualified to come into the Supreme Court and the types of questions that they were asking her. Now, it hasn't been that ridiculous. But if you know what I'm talking about then you know what I'm talking about. It was really interesting to see that take place on like the national level, because it's relatable for a Black woman to be totally qualified to do work that is very much necessary but still to be questioned.

That's not an experience that I'm alone in, there's science and there's research that has indicated that as much as donations and funding are spent and given to organizations that are involved in environmental justice or just environmental work, less than 3 percent of those funds tend to be allocated towards BIPOC—Black, Indigenous, people of color—who are doing this work. So that's the greatest obstacle.

Sarah Beck: That is something that we're, I think, becoming more and more aware of just in terms of that context, too, of the landscape of a city and the history of the land use in that city.

I mean, we know from all across the country, these stories like what you're talking about, like how we got here to this place, where one neighborhood seems to have been blessed by a great deal—



Colah B Tawkin: An abundance.

Sarah Beck: Lots of input and abundance of resources and then another neighborhood is not.

I should actually ask you the opposite side of that. Is there anything that is an especially a great asset to doing this work at this moment, when I think that there is getting to be an awareness that people talking about shade cover and climate change, for instance. Do you feel like in some ways the moment has come for this conversation?

Colah B Tawkin: Absolutely. The moment has been here for some time, but this is a great time considering the tools and the resources that we have—particularly social media and being able to build community around a cause or work and having greater access to more support. When you're really savvy about it, then you're able to really get people to pay attention.

I'm still working on that, but that is definitely an asset, because the social media aspect not only allows for building community of supporters—potential or otherwise—but also allows me to see that I'm not alone. I feel isolated a lot, and then I'm reminded that, “Oh, wow, I'm not alone doing this. There are other people who have been doing this way longer than me,” and that's very helpful.

Sarah Beck: Sometimes seeing something with fresh eyes is the result of diversifying the number of different people who are coming to the conversation.

Colah B Tawkin: Yes.

Sarah Beck: And diversifying who those people are. If you've got a path of “Well, we've done this,” and all sometimes it takes as someone like yourself coming into the conversation going, “How come?” Like, “Why is that?”

Colah B Tawkin: Shake the table is what I describe that as. You're so incredibly spot on with that because it makes more sense to listen to like the Elders, especially the Indigenous Elders who have traditionally had respect—just respect, that's the main word—for the land. And listening to young people who are able to see things in such a different way and offer more innovative solutions.

It's necessary to very much listen to the voices of people who have not traditionally been a part of the conversation.



And that's a part of the goal of this movement that I'm starting with the UnderGround Arborist is to bring more Black people into the conversation, to invite them to be a part of it, not do that finger wagging thing where it's like "Black people don't do this and don't do that." Are you really going to listen to someone who is finger-wagging at you, versus someone who is inviting you into the conversation and indicating, "Look, I noticed that there's a problem that is affecting your community, especially in a disproportionate way," or our community, because I am Black, but, "I noticed that there's a problem that is affecting our community, and I would like to have you consider how what I'm doing is posing a solution to the problem."

Sarah Beck: I want to ask you about that Black representation in horticulture. And I'm wondering if this just felt very obvious to you or if you had just had a moment? I feel like sometimes there's a revelatory moment where you look around because you're into something.

Colah B Tawkin: Yes.

Sarah Beck: And you go, "Wait a minute. Where are the Black people?"

Colah B Tawkin: "I don't see myself." Yes.

Sarah Beck: Did you have a moment like that when it comes to the world of horticulture?

Colah B Tawkin: Oh yeah, absolutely. That's a big part of the reason why I knew that I needed to start the *Black in the Garden* podcast. There was a collection of moments. I'll tell you about a few of them.

One of the first moments that I had; I was so mad. This was before I even thought about the podcast. I was really annoyed when I just was a new gardener, and I was very much into planting ornamental plants. It started out for me with wanting to grow food and then I started with house plants, but I was in Florida. So I recognized that houseplants could also be planted outdoors in the landscape. And so I really got into creating landscapes and I really wanted to create a landscape that made me feel like it was an extension of my style, my personality, my culture.

And so when I go to the garden stores, I remember there was this pottery store that I went to and I was looking for specifically ornamental garden decor. And I came across an aisle that was full of white gnomes and fairies. And I was very frustrated by



that. Very frustrated. I was like, “Okay, I see what's going on here, but why isn't there a variation of the colors?”

There's a connection to be made there between the way that there's not a reasonable amount of diversity in horticulture, but we should always be mimicking nature, in how nature has biodiversity or just diversity in general. We can certainly take a lesson from our natural surroundings.

Relatability is important—like we were just talking about—and having different voices and different people represented. If you go and do a Google search and you look up “gardener,” see what comes up majorly. When you are looking through magazines or looking at media, especially on television, whether it be the big channels or the public access channels, what are you seeing? What are you not seeing?

I didn't see me. I didn't hear me when I was listening to garden podcasts and I said, “Mm, I want to do a podcast, anyway.” I come from a communications background. I've done college radio, and I know that I have a really cool and unique perspective on most things, just because I'm usually able to see nuance in the gray area.

And I recognize that there's a big piece that's missing when it's only one perspective that is consistently being pushed and promoted and that's not helping everybody. And that's making people who aren't represented to not feel seen, and that makes them feel like they're not welcome in it. That makes an impact on children when they're considering what kind of careers they could potentially enter, and they are not going to consider horticulture if they have not ever come across someone like me.

I currently have blue hair and I present pretty young. I'm usually told that I could pass for a college kid. I present the way that I present, because that's naturally how a reflection of how I feel, but I also understand that it resonates with younger people when they see, “Oh, okay. She doesn't look like some old stuffy lady. She's given a little hipness and I'm that much more interested in hearing,” because it goes back to relatability and approachability.

To answer that question: didn't see myself, didn't hear myself. There's not representation. And I always understood that when you notice that there is something that's missing, then generally the person who's doing the noticing is the one that needs to do the adding to that field, that niche, whatever the case may be. So I was happy to do it.



Sarah Beck: Tell me about what your vision is for the future of garden media. What are the positive outcomes of putting some attention to representation in especially the garden media space? I also want you to tell us how other garden media personalities, or entities, organizations can support this vision. What do you see those next steps as being? What's the best version of where this can go?

Colah B Tawkin: So how the future looks like ideally to me is just literally more representation and more inclusion.

It's interesting how America and in the West—but I'm just going to talk about America because that's where we are—when you consider the history of this country and how it came to be, and the melting pot aspect, that's not practiced in every field. And so it's just as simple as seeing more inclusion.

It's not just Black and brown people. It's also people who identify in different ways when it comes to gender and sexual orientation. It's people of different abilities. Are we serving people who are not able to get up and down and move around the garden? How are we being inclusive? Not just in the representation, but in the serving these, I call them forgotten communities.

There's a lot of progress that we need to make in those regards, but how people can support would certainly be by: think about who you are, think about what your privileges are, and then flip that and consider, “What must it be like for someone who doesn't have the access that I have? What must it be like? Who are these people? Where can I find these people?” Go and support those people. Support me. You're listening to me right now.

When it comes to being underrepresented, that goes hand-in-hand with being underserved, underfunded, and things like that. So the ways that I would suggest supporting and trying to make a difference is by starting with opening your mind, opening your eyes, and looking around you and considering like, “What must it be like for people who just don't have it the way that I have it?” Maybe you have a yard and you have access to raised beds or whatever, where some people don't even have the space to grow. What can you do to change that? What can you do to provide access? Is it transportation?

Get creative. Certainly start by considering who are the people that don't have the access and the privilege that you have, and then go seek them out and listen. Listen and read and get informed. But don't just stop at listening, because that's kind of passive. And ask. Don't be afraid to ask. In the asking, I would highly suggest that



acknowledging your privilege be at the forefront. And if that makes you uncomfortable, then so be it because consider what their experience is like.

Sarah Beck: Well, it's uncomfortable to not be included, too.

Colah B Tawkin: It is uncomfortable. I mean, if you get to walk through your local garden center and see fairies and gnomes that look like you, then there's a privilege there and you don't have to deal with that discomfort. But go ask the people who work there—or not just the people that work there because they don't have no control over that.

But if you have access to the people who actually are doing the supply, then ask them, “Hey, why is there not more diversity here?” I know that there's a range of people who listen to this show who are certainly in a position to question things. And that's a big part of it: asking why is it like this? How can it be more diverse? Things like that.

Sarah Beck: This keeps coming back to, I think, that same concept of sometimes just having other voices at the table makes you aware and makes you recognize something.

Colah B Tawkin: Yes.

Sarah Beck: To me, innovation really comes to mind, I think about how diversifying the field of horticulture. I'd love to focus in on that with you just specifically for a second, because I think we've seen a lot of examples. There's been a lot of DEI awareness over the last few years, where people are really looking at probably tech industry or they're looking at other industries and going, “Oh wow. When we brought in new perspectives, amazing, we drove innovation.”

I'm just so curious, how do you think a more diverse field of horticulture could impact innovation as well as the optimistic outcomes for people and the environment? Every time we bring a new perspective in, we really gain something totally new from that person being there.

Colah B Tawkin: Absolutely. The first thing that comes to mind for me is, let's look to the past. I've been doing a series called “Botanical Black History,” and innovation is already there. It's already been made. When you consider how there is an absolute need for regenerative agriculture.



I think about George Washington Carver and how he was at the forefront of that movement, but is in so many ways not credited for that. That's innovation, in a sense.

Marie Clark Taylor was an incredible botanist. She went to Howard University, but she was the first to get a degree, a degreed botanist. And what she was able to do as a professor of botany was she was able to see ways that botany was being taught that was not adequate, as far as doing a disservice to the students by not using things like natural materials in the teachings.

So fortunately she was what I like to call the teacher's teacher. She was able to actually lead seminars and things like that for her fellow educators of botany, like they weren't even using microscopes. So she was able to innovate in that way.

If you look to the past and you see innovations that have already been made, and then you come back to the present and you consider how we can diversify to see a better outcome for the future, then I just like to look to the past for that proof that it's already happened and it still continues to happen.

The innovation will absolutely come along with the diversification, that's a no brainer.

Sarah Beck: I wanted to ask you about your exploration of botanical Black history, because I think this research clearly has influenced the way you view the future, and you also had mentioned culture and cultural preservation. Do you feel like your research has changed your perspective on just this role of preserving culture in this conversation when we're talking about horticulture?

Colah B Tawkin: Yeah, definitely. And my research on botanical Black history and having to do so much digging.

Sarah Beck: Just from the start, the fact that it's not immediately accessible?

Colah B Tawkin: Just to find it. When I first—back in 2019 and '20—was looking for Black history figures that were specifically related to botany, plants, horticulture, or whatever, I had to go to the library. And you know if you got to go and dig in those encyclopedias—

Sarah Beck: You mean, physically you went to the library.



Colah B Tawkin: I had to take it old school and I do pride myself on being analog. So I'm not saying that I hated it or that it was terrible, but I'm just saying that the internet is so vast and wide and full of information. But those stories, not there.

I got to give a huge shout out to a gigantic relevant inspiration, Abra Lee, who has literally been beating the streets and going and doing the research on the history, the specifically Black history, of just gardening and culture and fashion and structures and things like that. She's huge inspiration to me.

Most of the times, things that I share, people are like, "I didn't know." Whether I'm talking about something that happened a long time ago, like Stephen Slade accidentally inventing flue-cured tobacco. That changed the tobacco industry.

Sarah Beck: Oh, that's an interesting one.

Colah B Tawkin: This is something that I learned from reading *We Are Each Other's Harvest* by Natalie Baszile, who I got to interview last year.

But we're all just doing all this research and we're looking for whether we call ourselves historians or storytellers. It doesn't matter. We are literally unearthing information that needs to be shared. It inspires people. In most instances, what I share, people are like, "I did not know that," and I'm just getting started. I've only shared maybe like 20 botanical Black history facts, if that. It takes a lot of research. It takes a lot of time, and it takes support for that reason.

So representation is everything, and there was just so many ways that I did not feel like I was a part of the conversation. Fortunately, I'm not too shy.

So I said, "I'm going to start a podcast. I'm going to talk to Black plant enthusiasts," and had no idea that I was going to find as much as I found and have the impact that I've had, but certainly knew that it would be possible, especially if I just stuck to it.

And I found my calling in doing it, because having a love of plants, having a love of my culture, Black culture, and having the love of media. And getting to the point where I am now, where I've been doing this for a little bit over two years. By now, I can say that it's more than a podcast. It's Black plant media.

Sarah Beck: How can all gardeners contribute to positive future outcomes, specifically supporting diversity in horticulture or really any of the outcomes you talked about? How can we all as gardeners make sure that a Black child feels like they



are welcome in the field of horticulture and they have the potential to absolutely shine in this realm?

Colah B Tawkin: It really depends on—cause see, my thing is I understand that as a white person, if you just go up to the first Black kid that you see and you say, “I want you to,” don't do that. Definitely talk to the parents first, I guess, but consider what you could do.

Find the school that has those kids there and determine what you could do to contribute. Perhaps they have a garden plot that needs to be reinvigorated, that needs to be tended to. Perhaps you could actually physically donate your time and get in there and get the kids involved and show them the miracle of just germinating a seed.

Perhaps you could donate some resources. Perhaps that could be money. That would be great. But there's so many ways that you could contribute. You could also donate some supplies. We all know that teachers don't have all the supplies, and we know that schools—as much as they are supposed to be serving—they don't have all of the tools. They don't have all the resources, they don't have all the people.

That's just one example. Just reach out to me if you really have a specific goal, if this is resonating with you in that way. Let's see, creatively, based on what you have, I will be willing to offer that. Send me an email, because if it's for the benefit of the kids, I'm willing to have a conversation about it.

Sarah Beck: Love that. Thank you so much.

Colah B Tawkin: Thank you for inviting me. I always close out everything that I do, especially with my soil cousins, that's my supporters and listeners, by wishing love, light, and soil.

Sarah Beck: Thank you. Oh, this is great, love that. Thanks for being a garden futurist as well.

Colah B Tawkin: Always.

Sarah Beck: Adriana, I know when we've talked about this, something that you and I both have a lot of passion for is the idea that diverse perspectives drive innovation. This is such an asset to our garden futurism. What are some of the ideas or that come to mind for you when we think about innovation being driven by diversity?



Adriana López-Villalobos: The first thing that comes to my mind is problem solving. I think having people that have experienced different circumstances and situations in life, have cultural backgrounds brings together perspectives that otherwise you wouldn't have

If you think about how many food plants or ornamental plants can be grown in different places, people experience the same problems across the board, and they come up with different solutions.

So if you bring together different ways of solving one problem, you end up with a more creative and resourceful solution for a problem.

Sarah Beck: I agree. This is such a powerful truth. What applies to what you were saying about science and innovation also applies to cultural innovation—this idea that if we want to build a future in which people are connected to nature and plants, it's going to be so important for us to find ways for everyone to be included in those conversations, as well.

Resources

Colah B Tawkin runs [UnderGround Arborist](#) and hosts the [Black in the Garden](#) podcast, which recently launched a [coloring book](#).

She cites [Tyler Thrasher](#) and [Abra Lee](#) as inspirations.

Baszile, Natalie. 2021. *We Are Each Other's Harvest: Celebrating African American Farmers, Land, and Legacy*. New York: HarperCollins.