

# GREEN ACRES

Jason “Farmer Jay” McCobb  
is a force of nature in  
sustainable farming.

**BY NILA DO SIMON**  
**PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALISSA DRAGUN**





Jason McCobb has made a career out of radishes, fennel and cabbage. From his 2.5-acre farm in Lake Worth, where nearly 70 chickens roam, his two dogs (Drake and Bear) run around, and Pearl the pig roots the soil, McCobb has been spreading the gardening gospel to local restaurants and residents for the past decade.

The charismatic agriculturalist who dons the moniker “Farmer Jay” is everything his nickname implies: a man dedicated to getting the most out of our green earth. He’s taught homeowners how to grow produce sustainably, as well as provided eateries with locally cultivated, organic fruits and vegetables. Even more, his simple message of “know what you’re eating” is catching fire in the South Florida community.

Originally from Tampa, McCobb says he gets his green thumb from his grandparents, who loved spending time in their gardens. After a stint in the Army, McCobb got his first taste of the food and beverage industry while at Red Bull, where he launched the brand’s first major marketing campaign in South Florida. But it was as The Breakers Palm Beach’s lead gardener, a position he earned after working at a landscape firm, where he got his hands dirty with the state of Florida farming.

“We have such a problem with our local agriculture,” McCobb, 41, says. “I didn’t really realize it until I was with The Breakers. That’s when I realized there were problems with our food system, and we were not addressing them. The chemicals I saw being used on the soil were just detrimental to our bodies and our earth.”

So McCobb did what came natural to him. He encouraged The Breakers to stop using pesticides, and he started composting. He even took on revitalizing the

**BETTING THE FARM** After studying the problematic state of South Florida agriculture, Jason “Farmer Jay” McCobb began teaching the importance of sustainable farming by building organic residential gardens and through his youth training classes.



Edible Flower Mix



Eggplants



Tatsoi



Red Rib Dandelions

## HOMEGROWN SUCCESS

Farmer Jay displays the produce that grew on his South Florida farm this season — and what roams on it.



Sun Gold Tomatoes



Shiso



Rhode Island Red Chicken Eggs



Collard Greens



Lacinato Kale



Arugula



Rhode Island Red Chicken Hen



Cabbage



Icicle Radishes



Ruby Chard



Sunflowers



Turmeric



Purple Top Radishes

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—Jason McCobb

owner’s forgotten on-property herb garden, which he says was originally “ornamental,” as his special project. He built a relationship with the resort’s chefs and kitchen staff, asking for scraps such as eggshells, fruit and vegetable leftovers and anything else the kitchen was willing to give him to produce nutrient-rich compost. Looking back, McCobb realizes how out of place he must have looked walking around a luxurious respite such as The Breakers with food scraps and worms in tow. “People would see me with these bins and carrying around a bunch of worms; they used to call me ‘the worm guy,’” he says.

Despite devouring every book on composting and sustainable and biodynamic farming he could get his hands on, McCobb realized he was still at a distinct disadvantage not having worked or trained under experienced farmers. So, he convinced The Breakers to sponsor him on a three-month internship under Bob Cannard, the renowned farmer for Chef Alice Waters of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California. There, he learned the importance of having a diverse farm with varieties of produce, instead of a singular system.

“In California, I’d find refuge out in the middle of the field,” McCobb says. “I remember sitting in the fields and seeing a flock of birds come by. It was so beautiful seeing animals interact with the farmland. That’s when I realized that farms should be an extension of nature, and that wasn’t happening in Florida.

“I turned into the plant geek that I am today from that moment,” McCobb says. “Everything that I learned about farming, I learned from Bob.”

Upon returning from his eye-opening internship, McCobb was galvanized to spread the message of sustainable urban farming. He eventually left The Breakers to start Farmer Jay Pure Organics, where he began consulting for local homeowners and restaurants, including Sublime Restaurant & Bar, Farmer’s Table and Max’s Harvest, and building raised garden boxes and home gardens.

McCobb finds much of his consultation is simply educating aspiring green thumbs on the do’s and don’ts of plant life. During one consultation, a homeowner said he couldn’t get rid of plant lice that was breeding quickly and

killing his plants. The owner was using an organic spray to get rid of the lice, something he thought was better than using normal pesticide. “But the problem with this spray is that it’s not selective,” McCobb explains. “It kills all the bugs—even the good ones,” After inspecting the plants, he realized the problem: The plant required sun, but it was situated on a shaded patio, which created an imbalance. As McCobb puts it, the owner was spraying for no reason, which ended up causing more problems than necessary.

“At first, it was a hard task to get people to understand where I was coming from,” McCobb says. “Everybody thought I was crazy to not use pesticides. Remember, I was ‘the worm guy.’ But they eventually came around. People were skeptical when I told them to put worms in their gardens; now they are asking me where to get worms.”

The South Florida community has taken notice of this modern-day farmer. His TV-friendly good looks have made him a regular contributor at a local Palm Beach County CBS station, and he’s been invited to give a couple local TEDx talks about sustainable gardening. He’s also a regular at the weekly Delray GreenMarket, where, depending on the season, he’s presenting responsibly grown kale, lettuce, arugula, tomatoes, peppers, turnips, radishes, beans, fennel, different herbs, mulberry, oranges and passion fruit, among a multitude of other produce from his farm.

When speaking with McCobb, it’s hard not to buy into his message. Soft-spoken and easygoing in his delivery, he remains persuasive about these ideals, so much so that he started a farming course for young students called Jr. Sprouts. Sponsored by Chipotle (the owner of the restaurant chain began his career with Alice Waters), Jr. Sprouts features an eight-week course designed to teach children how to compost, look for good bugs for the garden and more, all in the hopes of inspiring the next generation of sustainable farmers.

“It’s not that difficult,” McCobb says of farming. “Plants are living organisms, and they are a lot like us: They need water, sun and to be taken care of. If you put the right ingredients into the soil, the plant will be healthy, too—just like our own bodies.” ■



## Farmer Jay's Urban Farming Tips

### PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

"It's a marathon. Just like you can't just go out there and run, you have to practice with gardening as well. It won't be perfect right away, but keep practicing."

### THE IMPORTANCE OF A GARDEN

"A food production garden should be as common as a kitchen. You want it to be a part of your house."

### EAT YOUR GREENS

"They are probably one of the most important things we can eat. Greens also boost your immune system, and they are good starter plants for everyone."

### GO OUTDOORS

"The best fertilizer is the farmer's shadow. We need to go back to basics, like pulling weeds, which burns 400 calories per hour, instead of using pesticides."



**FARMERS MARKET** Farmer Jay is photographed here at Farmer's Table in Boca Raton, where he's installed several raised bed gardens.

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