

Teaching Life Skills Through Beekeeping and Farming

Sankofa Farms in Durham, North Carolina, runs an agriculture academy to empower local students and provide the community access to fresh foods

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Sankofa Farms is building a gateway to healthy food, agricultural education, and much more in Durham, North Carolina

By Erin Brereton; Image courtesy of Samantha Everette Photography

Kamal Bell founded Sankofa Farms in 2016 to meet two crucial needs he identified in his Durham, North Carolina, community: access to fresh food and inspiration for students.

"I had this idea: The farm could help ease the effect of food deserts, and the youth would be able to take ownership of it," Kamal says.

After purchasing a 12-acre parcel of land, the middle school teacher created an agricultural academy where local teenagers could learn about farming, build life skills, and grow produce.

Convincing 13- to 18-year-olds to participate in the farm's program hasn't been difficult, Kamal says. "Once students were exposed to it, it didn't matter if they wanted to go into agriculture or not; there was still [an] aspect they could relate to."

Kamal leverages Sankofa's academy to not only educate but empower the youth. "I emphasize it's a space where we can learn agriculture from our perspective, because African Americans don't have many platforms we can use to learn about farming [where the] information is coming from us. It's a place we can work and see ourselves in the field."





Building a Buzz

Sankofa grows kale, collard greens, lettuce, fennel, and other produce and distributes the crops locally through organizations such as an urban ministry, a community group membership-based food co-op, and a community-supported **agriculture (CSA) program**.

And though Sankofa initially raised hens, quail, and ducks for eggs, the farm has since pivoted to focus on beekeeping. Kamal and several students became certified in beekeeping through the Durham County Beekeepers Association. After starting out with six honeybee colonies in 2018, Sankofa increased its colony count to 20 in 2019, and currently houses 40.

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Honey that Kamal and his students gather from the hives is spun, run through a strainer to remove foreign chemicals or objects, and packaged in jars to sell online. Last year, the farm's honey efforts were profitable, yielding 60 pounds worth, according to Kamal.

In addition, Sankofa runs a beehive leasing program where locals sign up to lease one of the farm's hives and receive a tutorial on how a hive operates, along with five jars of honey.

Learning Opportunities in Bloom

Throughout the year, students play a key role in maintaining the colonies. In the fall, for instance, they help inspect the structures once a week and may merge hives by stacking them to ensure weaker colonies have enough honey for winter.

"We're using a healthy colony checklist—making sure there's a healthy population of worker bees, there aren't any stressors, they have enough food and room," Kamal says.

In addition to beekeeping logistics, the farm's honeybees teach students other concepts. Some relate directly to STEM and other school curriculum learning, while others support valuable life skills.

"We talk about the genetics of the colony; we talk about food technology, the aspect of starting with nothing and being able to build something out," Kamal says. "[Students] also see the economic part of it: If you're good at [beekeeping], you can make money. What they're doing at the farm helps them in their schoolwork because they're now able to see the utility of it."

For example, students use what Kamal calls bee math, which allows them to determine how much time they have to manipulate a hive based on bees' 16-day egg hatching cycle. And building **greenhouse structures** to extend the farm's growing season when temperatures drop has taught students about engineering.

Helping out at Sankofa also offers students a chance to strengthen skills like teamwork, time management, and problem solving.

Agricultural academy students work at the farm on weekends during the school year and three to five times during the week in the summer.

On days produce is being distributed, Kamal and his students are at the farm by 5:30 a.m., steadfastly cutting heads of lettuce and other crops from the ground with harvesting knives.

Sankofa's honey production, too, takes time and dedication; students need to catch bees, inspect colonies, and perform other tasks on a regular basis.

As a result, along with the produce grown at Sankofa, a number of other, less tangible things—such as students' sense of self-reliance and purpose—have taken root.

"I've seen them develop a better perspective of society and where they see themselves going," Kamal says. "They're more confident interacting with people. The fact they stick with something and watch it grow—and they have a new set of skills they can go into different situations and environments and utilize—gives them a sense of empowerment."

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