

The Journey of GrowJourney: A Love Story

Despina Yeargin

Though the problems of the world are increasingly complex, the solutions remain embarrassingly simple...every society that grows extensive lawns could produce all its food on the same area, using the same resources, and...world famine could be totally relieved...

Bill Mollison

We're optimists who believe we can help design a better food system: one seed, one person, one yard, and one farm at a time.

Aaron & Susan von Frank, founders of GrowJourney

Over the past century, 75 to 95% of the world's heirloom seeds have permanently disappeared. Heirloom seeds are open-pollinated varieties passed down from generation to generation. They offer greater diversity of flavor, higher levels of nutrition and genetic characteristics which improve and strengthen the plant's abilities to resist disease and adapt to regional soils and temperatures. Gardening with smarter seeds means that we grow better, more nutrient-rich plants, which may require less fertilizer and are better equipped to fight off disease. Ultimately, what that means for us is that we can become healthier people through the food that we grow (or buy locally) and eat. If heirlooms continue to disappear, it means fewer choices and a more homogenized and less nutritious plate of food on our dinner tables. For Aaron and Susan von Frank, the global loss of heirloom seeds wasn't just disconcerting; it was a call to action.

Today, in Greenville, South Carolina, where the downtown area thrives and continues to hit all of the "Top 10" lists of places to live; while the building of apartments and condos grows like Jack's storybook beanstalk; where the rapid growth of restaurants and new retail businesses continues to emulate "Travel and Leisure" magazine's number 1 world travel destination, Charles-

ton, South Carolina, a different kind of growth is taking place. In an average-sized house, in an average-sized neighborhood and without capital from a large corporation, a young couple raise ducks and manage a small business grown from the dirt in their average back yard... a business that they hope will affect change.

Aaron and Susan von Frank's business is GrowJourney, a USDA-certified organic, heirloom Seeds of the Month Club, which sells subscriptions to a monthly shipment of heirlooms seeds such as Red Bull Brussels Sprouts, Noire de Carmes Melon, a true French cantaloupe maintained at least as early as 1787 by Carmelite monks, and Strawberry Spinach, a variety native to North America, but which was "rediscovered" in 500 year old European monastery gardens. The von Franks have grown their business holistically; not only do they sell organic heirloom seeds, but the entire GrowJourney team is made up of organic gardeners and Permaculture teachers, recycling nerds and composting aficionados, and they preach what they practice as advocates of organic and regenerative (or sustainable) gardening methods. According to the Rodale Institute, "Regenerative organic agriculture improves the resources it uses, rather than destroying or depleting them. It is a holistic systems approach to agriculture that encourages continual on-farm innovation for environmental, social, economic and spiritual well-being." Aaron and Susan's passion and dedication to their business, and the path getting there, carry lessons for all of us.

Change doesn't happen overnight.

We are not born caring about our planet, the people we interact with, the food we eat or where it comes from and how it's grown; a nurturing family and community help to shape us into the kind of people who care and who take actions that make a positive difference. Aaron and Susan both grew up surrounded by caring and nurturing parents who valued education and a healthy lifestyle. Their parents were teachers, and besides instructing in the social sciences, philosophy and special needs education, they also taught their children the importance of growing your own food and doing it in a way that gave back to the earth and replenishing its resources.

Aaron's earliest childhood memories "... go back to 30 years ago, eating organic produce in my parents' and grandparents' gardens." His family had been inspired by the writing and research of J. I. Rodale and "Rodale's Organic Life" magazine, one of the pioneering publications of the organic

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This is where it begins for reversing climate change and growing healthier and happier people. ”

movement in the U.S., and Susan's experiences ran parallel to Aaron's. Sometimes the influences guiding us, while they are powerful, seem very subtle and go unnoticed; Susan eventually went on to study at the College of Charleston (South Carolina), graduating with a degree in biology, armed with a very technical and research-oriented mindset. Aaron attended Furman University, graduating with a degree in political science, focused on the humanities and systems-thinking.

Following their college years, their paths crossed. They fell in love, they bought a house with a yard, they got married and made new friends; not necessarily in that order. One of

these new friends was Eliza Holcombe Lord, a Master Gardener, Master Naturalist and Permaculture instructor, who furthered their education by inviting them to dinner and taking them on a tour of her garden. "She was the catalyst for our first garden venture," says Susan, "teaching us so much about foods that we'd never heard of or experienced before. Eliza served us Ground Cherries--wow! We learned about heirlooms and all types of produce not available at the grocery store."

They were so inspired by that initial meeting with Eliza (and in fact, she now serves as the Education Director for GrowJourney) that they had to get their hands dirty and give it a go for themselves, and that's where their love of organic gardening began. "We started with a pretty small garden in our back yard," she says, "which eventually took over the back yard, but we couldn't stop there." The more they learned, the more they wanted to grow, literally. "In our second year of organic gardening," says Aaron, "we took over the entire back yard, in our third year we incorporated both side yards and in our fourth year the front yard also became part of our garden."

Their knowledge grew as their garden grew and so did their passion for permaculture and for healing the earth, one seed at a time. The von Franks turned their passion into Tyrant Farms, a personal blog through which they shared their journey as organic gardeners and the challenge to KIGI (Know It or Grow It) the food you eat. Tyrant Farms also became part of the fuel which fired up GrowJourney. "As we got more obsessed," says Aaron, "we

grew more and more heirloom varieties. Susan would get frustrated by the overwhelming number of choices in her piles of seed catalogs.” After her spending weeks trying to make a purchase decision, I asked out loud if there was a curated subscription service that would do that for her to remove the stress of choice overload.” There wasn’t, and the seed for GrowJourney was planted.

Once we move forward on the right path, it’s difficult to return to old ways.

In the edible organic garden landscape surrounding their house today, Aaron and Susan tend to over 350 species of edible and medicinal plants and a few edible fungi...just for fun.

Moved and inspired by their own experience, the von Franks experienced a massive mind shift. “It heightened our awareness,” says Aaron, “of how terribly human beings are managing earth’s systems based on single-metric outcomes (yield per acre) rather than a more holistic approach that focuses on food production models that can be ecologically, economically and socially regenerative, not extractive and degenerative.”

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*
“The Road Not Taken”, Robert Frost

Susan tells us they’re seeing more and more that “people are disconnected from food origins now. They have no personal sense of how ecosystems work.” Apparently, this ecological illiteracy has been found to cause massive systemic problems, which Aaron and Susan are trying to help address through GrowJourney.

Founded in 2014, GrowJourney has members in all 50 U.S. states and in every Canadian province. The von Franks believe that organic plant breeding is critical for organic home gardening and farming. “Organically grown seeds perform better in organic growing systems,” says Aaron, “due to their epigenetic inheritance. I know it sounds crazy, but it’s an amazing truth.” Epigenetic inheritance refers to how parent plants pass on their experiences and teach their kid plants such things as how to be more responsive to pests and other environmental stressors.

Aaron likens heirloom seeds to books in a library with knowledge compounding from one generation to the next. “Just as it is with books,” he says, “it’s important that each generation preserve its heirloom seeds while also creating new ones (new heirlooms). These heirlooms may be adapted to specific soil types or climate conditions; have the perfect flavor for local cuisine, or even be resistant to certain pests and diseases.”

The von Franks are in love with the idea (and belief) that regenerative gardening systems, education and saving of heirloom seeds can make a difference with healthier people and a healthier environment. “Heirloom seeds aren’t just a hipster trend with no scientific grounding,” Aaron says. “In fact, heirlooms often pack much more nutrition than their modern counterparts, and they offer rich and unique flavors to boot.”

We all need a helping hand.

For the von Franks, selling seeds is not just about a sale; it is about the growing journey of their subscribers, and providing them with an ongoing support system to ensure that the GrowJourney seeds will grow successfully in their gardens.

The long-term vision for GrowJourney is to develop the infrastructure necessary to transform America’s chemically-intensive lawns into organic edible landscapes. According to NASA, turf grass lawns are now the largest irrigated crop in America. That’s astounding. The von Franks have a brighter outlook. They believe that the home landscapes of the future will look and function differently than our current monoculture grass lawns, and they want to hasten that cultural tradition. “Massive agrobiodiversity combined with no-till organic and permaculture food production systems can restore entire ecosystems,” says Aaron. This type of mind shift and action-taking can yield important results: region-specific crops and cuisine, cleaner air and water, sequestration of carbon and greenhouse gasses.

That’s where the von Franks see their greatest impact; not just in selling seeds, but in helping to change an entire system. “This,” says Susan, “is real and attainable. This is where it begins for reversing climate change and growing healthier and happier people.”