

Leah Penniman

Before being forced from their homes and into slavery, the women of West Africa braided seeds into their hair. Those seeds not only represented their knowledge of cultivating the earth but also their cultural knowledge. Leah Penniman, a Black Kreyol educator, farmer, author, and food justice activist, works to honor that legacy through her work with Soul Fire Farm.



Originally from Central Massachusetts, Penniman's dedication to the earth started at a young age and eventually led her to starting Soul Fire Farm in Grafton, NY with her partner in 2010. Not only does the farm provide fresh produce and products on a sliding-scale payment model to an area experiencing what Penniman calls "food apartheid," it also has multiple job training programs for Black and Latine farmers of all ages. Soul Fire Farm practices techniques that can be traced to West Africa such as polyculture, the practice of planting certain flowers next to crops to bring in beneficial insects that act as a natural pesticide. The farm also practices silvopasture, a technique that involves integrating trees into grazing pasture to create benefits for livestock, diversify farm production, and mitigate the effects of climate change as trees help sequester carbon in the soil.

Penniman and Soul Fire Farm are "dedicated to uprooting racism and seeding sovereignty in the food system." Working with the Stockbridge Munsee band of Mohican Indians, they returned 250 acres and have developed a cultural respect easement, meaning they have deeded rights to the Soul Fire property in a shared sovereignty arrangement. She told Vogue in 2020, "A big win at the end of all this would be if there were hundreds of thousands more Black and Brown farmers and community gardeners...That's the endgame—food sovereignty, for folks to be part of and have ownership of their food system."

ABOUT THE ARTIST | Kristi DiSalle

Kristi DiSalle's artistic practice spans a variety of media including oil pastel, acrylic paint, and mixed media. She likes to create emotive and evocative pieces through the use of color and texture exploring themes of nature, identity, personal history, and social issues. She currently teaches elementary art and shows her work in numerous exhibitions. DiSalle, who attended the same high school as Leah Penniman, hopes this piece serves as both a tribute to Penniman's invaluable contributions to horticulture and as an invitation to reflect on our collective responsibility to the earth and to one another.

Spanish translation coming soon.