

Romondo Woods II: Planting a Movement

Over the past two years Mahindra NATC has had the privilege of developing partnerships with many of the most active urban farming organizations in Detroit. Among the longest standing and most valued of these partners has been The Greening of Detroit. Since the 2015 inception of our Urban Agriculture Grant Program, Mahindra NATC has been inspired by The Greening of Detroit's efforts to better the city and lives of its residents and has given upwards of \$45,000 to support and further both their farming work and rich slate of community programming. Reciprocating this support, The Greening of Detroit has twice invited Mahindra engineers to their flagship Detroit Market Garden to harvest fresh produce and learn about the practices and strategies behind sustainable farming. On both occasions Mahindra NATC team members were given instruction by exceptional agricultural minds. During an October 2015 visit to the Eastern Market Garden, then farm manager Marcellus Wheeler provided MNATC staff with a comprehensive understanding of urban farming, sharing insights ranging from desired soil PH levels to the ideal time to harvest purple okra. Wheeler was a gracious and vastly knowledgeable host to Mahindra's whole team and we were saddened to learn later that year that he had left The Greening of Detroit to pursue other opportunities. Luckily, lifelong Detroiter Romondo Woods II stepped in to take his place.

If you visit the Detroit Market Garden at 1850 Erskine St. any time between March and October



Romondo Woods II Tills the Detroit Market Garden

you're likely to see farm manager Romondo Woods II, and if you see Woods you're likely to see a smile. Laying compost, building garden beds, planting seeds, managing staff—Woods is in his element at the Detroit Market Garden. While he demonstrates the skill of a lifelong farmer and gardener, Woods is surprisingly new to the work. “My interest in farming developed around 2014. While I was in school for Biomedical Engineering, I just kept hearing this *Jumanji*-like call to learn about agriculture and teach children how to grow food,” Woods relates. This new-found interest in children's nutrition was not something wholly unaccounted for—it was around the time he felt called to urban farming that Woods' learned he would soon be a father.

In the Spring of 2014, Woods entered The Greening of Detroit's Apprenticeship Program, an intensive course that provides 750 hours of hands-on training in farming, agricultural education, and community relationship building. It was in this program that Woods' was able to fully

realize his gift for growing food. Woods' predecessor, Marcellus Wheeler, led the apprenticeship program and is a mentor Woods' credits with "teaching me the majority of everything I know at this point about how to live a sustainable lifestyle and manage a farm."

As a new father, it is perhaps the "sustainable lifestyle" Woods' is most concerned with. "Given our planet's rising population, accessible, fresh, locally-grown produce is becoming more important than ever," Woods states. For a long time, Detroit was considered by many to be a "food desert" with few grocery stores and even fewer sources of fresh, healthy food. Thanks to the work of organizations like The Greening of Detroit that's no longer the case. Woods, like many other lifelong Detroiters, is now enjoying easy access to fresh fruits and vegetables within the city limits for the first time. "The fact that my daughter can experience farm life and know exactly where her food is from is truly priceless, especially given the fact that I never had that opportunity growing up; never exactly knew what healthy eating looked like. To see her playing & enjoying the garden, it's liberating. Watching my diet transform along with hers has been all the motivation you can ask for."

Because of the Greening of Detroit and many other urban farming organizations, many families around Detroit are now starting to look like Wood's own—happy, healthy, and, yes, smiling.