



## **Season 1 Episode 5 – Get to Know Your Hosts**

**September 6, 2022**

Speaker 1:

Welcome to the Farming Basics podcast with Olivia Fuller. We'll have sustainable farming tips from growers across the state and extension specialists at Auburn University.

Olivia Fuller:

Welcome everybody. Thanks for joining us. Today we wanted to make sure that you knew your host, because we jumped in and started introducing a lot of the specialists and really cool people that we get to work with here on campus and really across the Southeast too, but we realized that you might not know your host very well. So we wanted to do a little informal chit chat today between Jacob and myself, myself being Olivia. And talk about a little bit of how we got here, why we do what we do, what fascinates us, and what we're looking forward to in the world of horticulture. So, Jacob, if you want to go first.

Jacob Kelley:

Yeah, me first.

Olivia Fuller:

You can talk about how you got here, where your start came from, why you care about horticulture, and hopefully that passion can bleed through to our listeners.

Jacob Kelley:

What got me started, I was born and raised in Montgomery and my great-grandmother always had plants around, and she planted pansies every year. And that was our thing. That's one of the things I remember the most about her, is going out in the garden and, for me as a young child, it was playing with bushes and pulling leaves off of bushes and looking at bugs and planting those pansies. I remember feeling the cold, what I was thinking was soil, but actually substrate.

Olivia Fuller:

I feel like a lot of people relate to this. I've heard this story a few times, of people getting into it an early age, or even having that same exact experience, but way later in life, if they grew up in a city. I feel like a lot of this horticulture revolution's kind of stemming from things just like that.

Jacob Kelley:

Yeah. Just touching and feeling at a very young age, as kids do. You're into everything. I wanted to be like Popeye, so she would get me spinach and I would eat it from the can. And I tried it the first time and I hated it. And I remember her being really upset. We would go to the market together, and we'd go to these farmer's markets in Montgomery. They still have the market outside the coliseum in Montgomery. And we would get okra. I loved fried okra as a kid. Who doesn't love fried food as a kid or as an adult? So we'd go to store, we'd get all the produce for dinner, she made the best spaghetti I'll ever eat in my life and it was fresh. It was from fresh tomatoes and things like that that we bought at this market. So we're interacting with growers at a really young age, and at the time it didn't mean anything to me. But now that I look back from where I am today, it meant everything. T helped form who I am today.

Olivia Fuller:

Honestly, Popeye had a bigger influence than anybody will ever know. He's the under-recognized hero in horticulture, I think.

Jacob Kelley:

I'm sure he's vegan, right?

Olivia Fuller:

I had the same thing. I would go and make my parents buy me those cans of spinach because I wanted to be strong like Popeye. And that was my same entryway into vegetables.

Jacob Kelley:

Popeye, saving the day with spinach. Get out there and eat your spinach, folks. So that was my spark. And I grew up inside the city of Montgomery, so that was my only interaction with growing fruits and vegetables and farming. I had friends that had cattle farms. That's not the same. Running around terrorizing cows is not the

same as eating Popeye's spinach and playing pansies with your great grandmother. So that was my introduction to Hort.

Olivia Fuller:

Well, that's adorable. Thanks for sharing that. So, now that you're in this world and you love it so much, what are your specialties within this? Because I know you worked on a kiwi orchard and there's just a few things that kind of took you in the direction that you went in.

Jacob Kelley:

Well, what got me into Hort is... So I had a long college career. I enjoyed living in Auburn more than I liked to going to class. And so it was tough for me to settle down and get into my studies, but I finally did. And I started looking at the curriculum, what I was going to have to take. And I remember taking chemistry one, and I had a really, really, really hard time with chemistry one. And so I started looking at the curriculum for horticulture versus wildlife and forestry, because I mean I wanted to work with animals or I wanted to work with plants, it was one or the other. I grew up watching Steve Irwin and Jeff Corwin and all these cool... And Bill Nye, all these scientists and stuff that really inspired all of us to get into this world. And I started looking at the curriculum and I saw that I wouldn't have to take chemistry two if I went into horticulture.

And so that was it for me; my decision was made. And I went to my first class. It was Dr. Foshee's Sustainable Vegetable Production class, and I immediately fell in love. I knew I had made the right decision, and I knew I was in the right place. And then from there it was Jay Spiers' Fruit Culture class, and he ended up being my advisor later on. When I started working with kiwi fruit, he got me into the kiwi fruit world. And at the time I was really frustrated with him about it. I was like, "Kiwi, really?" But after I got out there and started working with those plants, I really fell in love. My sense of wonder exploded once I got into horticulture and it hasn't stopped. We're on the rooftop earlier at our new garden and looking around, and then we're looking at different species of bees, all these different flowers, we're geeking out up there. And all that makes me want to do is go home and plant all these plants at home that I saw today.

Olivia Fuller:

I mean, speaking of that, what are you looking forward to most now? What excites you for the future?

Jacob Kelley:

Well, I've always liked helping people. I've had all these jobs and stuff in the past, and all of them kind of serve people in some way. And I'm really excited about what we have in the pipeline as far as helping growers in the future, what extensions working on that's going to help change the game for some of our growers, and hopefully make things a little bit more clear and easier for them to manage and understand. And I'm ready to get out in the field and get boots on the ground and get some of these practices implemented so these jokers can make money and Alabama can be a fruit and vegetable hub like we know it could be.

Olivia Fuller:

Yeah. I mean, we're seeing it emerge now with all these new innovative ideas coming to the state and, perfect example, the rooftop there at the Rane Culinary Science building that we got to see today. It's amazing. I was brought in on that project because of my experience in New York, but it's super exciting to see that happen and bring everything together is I guess what I'm most excited about. Seeing food, seeing... Because in horticulture, sometimes we get wrapped into it and all the insect sides and the flowers, and you forget you're dealing with food that's going to feed people and all the cool things you can do with it. So that's exciting to see all of that tied together in one place and see that happening in the state. All right. One more question for you, Jacob, do you have any interesting facts that you want to share with our listeners?

Jacob Kelley:

Well, I've had a lot of cool jobs. Most of them are in restaurants, but I've worked in hospitals, which was a very rewarding job, really exciting. The people you get to meet and a lot of positive energy in hospitals, you wouldn't believe it, but that's true. Especially in the field, I was a transporter, so I pushed people around and took them to their appointments. So that was fun. But the most interesting job I've had was, I worked at a gold mine. I'm not going to discuss exactly where it was, but it was in the state of Alabama and there was gold and platinum and all these precious metals. And I started out as a weed eater. They literally hired me to weed eat, and I weed eated.

Olivia Fuller:

I did not know this about you.

Jacob Kelley:

Yeah. I weed eated. And then I was a bush hogger. And so then I bush hogged.

Olivia Fuller:

At the gold mine.

Jacob Kelley:

Yeah. Yeah. Well there's lots of fields. There's lots of open spaces and we have grass on those spaces to keep from eroding and stuff. Worked my way up, I went to the grinding mill. I ran the grinding mill by myself. And so basically from there we dig these 30 foot holes. They take out a big chunk of rock, bring them to me, and then I grind them down to the specification that the chemist wanted. And then they did their chemistry stuff. Remember I said I wasn't good at chemistry. They did the chemistry stuff, I just smashed the rocks. If you've never smashed rocks, totally awesome. If you've got anger, if you've got frustration, rocks smashing. Totally go do it.

Olivia Fuller:

Well, if any of the horticulture students don't get jobs as soon as they graduate, now they know of the possibilities for after college work.

Jacob Kelley:

Yeah. Don't be afraid to jump into something you've never done before, or something that's weird or crazy or hair-brained or whatever. It's life. It's fun. It's supposed to be exciting, and it's what you make it. And so I love telling people that I worked at a gold mine in Alabama, because they look at me like I'm crazy. All right. So Olivia, we're going to hit you with your questions. Where did you get your start? And I want to know where you're from, because Olivia's from the middle of nowhere.

Olivia Fuller:

Middle of nowhere, Alabama. I am from the state, as many people don't believe, but I grew up in a very small town north of Birmingham. I did go to a Title I school. I was surrounded by a lot of hungry peers and that kind of sparked my interest in growing food. We had our own garden growing up and I got paid a penny for every rock that I collected from getting out of the garden. So that was my work experience.

Jacob Kelley:

I also picked pick up... I, excuse me, I'm having a mouth spasm. I also picked up rocks as a child.

Olivia Fuller:

Were you paid a penny for it?

Jacob Kelley:

No, I wasn't paid a penny. A lot of times we just got slushies, which is equal to a penny.

Olivia Fuller:

It's probably equal. Yeah. So that was my start. But then, had a long running history with playing outside, was, I guess, foraging before I knew that was going to be a hot topic in the state and in the world. But yeah, I was foraging, playing in the woods, doing the things that kids in very rural Alabama do, and came to Auburn and decided that I wanted to go into horticulture as well.

But it, at the time, didn't seem like the place to be. There weren't many people graduating with jobs and it just didn't seem like something to go into at the time. So I went into ag econ, and the agricultural world and the horticulture world, for our listeners, are very different worlds. Even though it's still kind of under the same umbrella, very similar in some ways, but also very different. So I was kind of done with the agriculture world and moved to New York City, because I didn't want to see another plant as long as I lived. And I was over the whole thing and moved to New York City and I got there and realized, "Oh, I've got an agriculture degree and I'm in the largest city in America. What am I supposed to do with this?" So I started working at a rooftop farm, which is, didn't know it at the time, but the largest rooftop farm in the world at that time. I think Paris has one that just beat it recently now.

Jacob Kelley:

Were there plants there?

Olivia Fuller:

Yes. So I did end up having to see more plants and that resparked my interest and love with horticulture in a whole new way. So I felt like I was coming back into this world as a child again. So, still super excited with that childlike passion about it all, and worked there for a few years and loved every second of it. But COVID hit, as we all know, and I, because of that, was brought back to Alabama. So here I am now, and I got the job with extension, and I get to do a lot of similar things, talk to people about plants. And once you're in that world, it all kind of looks similar. It's lots of cool people, and getting to help people and talk to them about vegetables and how they like to cook them. And it's so fun.

Jacob Kelley:

What would you say your specialties are?

Olivia Fuller:

My specialties within the horticulture world are probably mushrooms and urban-type things that you can grow in urban settings, because that's what I was accustomed to and navigated that world for a while. But that's what I'm most into, I would say.

Jacob Kelley:

I'd say if you can grow a plant on a rooftop, you can grow a plant anywhere.

Olivia Fuller:

Yeah. I mean it's very true. It was great to have such harsh conditions to figure out.

Jacob Kelley:

It's hot in New York.

Olivia Fuller:

Yeah. Very hot.

Jacob Kelley:

And you were way up there, right? How many stories was it?

Olivia Fuller:

It was about 20 or so.

Jacob Kelley:

That's like maybe higher than I've ever been in a building.

Olivia Fuller:

And surrounded by asphalt, completely. So it was kind of getting me accustomed to working here in Alabama again, because it was very hot on that roof, but that was a really cool experience. It taught me a lot about what you can grow on such a small space. And I know we have a lot of small farmers here in the state that... It's not like our surrounding neighbors, like Georgia, where it's large scale, one crop.

Jacob Kelley:

Big ag stuff.

Olivia Fuller:

And Alabama's really unique in that way. And I think using that urban farming model, it helps a lot of our growers, because that's kind of what they're doing, even though they're not necessarily in urban settings, it translates well.

Jacob Kelley:

Yeah, you can make a lot of money on an acre of vegetables.

Olivia Fuller:

A lot. You really can.

Jacob Kelley:

You can wear it out. A lot of my growers in Southwest Alabama are small scale, zero to five acre type situations, and they're doing the work out there. I mean, it's amazing what one person can do on an acre or a five acres, a small farm by themselves in their seventies.

Olivia Fuller:

Yeah. I see it all the time and I mean it's feeding them in their entire community.

Jacob Kelley:

They're out there supplying high quality produce and they've been doing it, a lot of them have been doing it for 15, 20 years now. They're selling to restaurants, so restaurants are getting local produce. They're selling at markets. I go to their markets all the time and I'm like, "Give me some of that good stuff, because I know how you grow it, and I like what I see." And I like supporting my guys too. And Olivia's farmers in west Alabama,

they're even more niche and you don't have any giant growers. I mean, I've got some big guys in my area, but you don't have...

Olivia Fuller:

They're all true market growers, depending on the market too, it looks different but it's really cool to see what you can make off of just a few acres. And I hope that this is encouraging to a lot of you that are thinking of starting out. You can start small and still see a lot of progress just from that.

Jacob Kelley:

Oh yeah. And you should start small. Don't get overly ambitious and plant five acres of strawberries. You're going to hate it when you have to pick them. I don't know this from experience, but I learned from seeing things. Olivia, your last question is, do you have any special talents or hidden tricks or cards up your sleeves that you would like to tell the world about?

Olivia Fuller:

Well, I can juggle.

Jacob Kelley:

That's a good talent.

Olivia Fuller:

My specialty is juggling all kinds of fruits and vegetables, but I was an only child.

Jacob Kelley:

If you ever see us at a booth or anything, ask Olivia to juggle, she'll do it. I'll make sure that there's some sort of fruit lying nearby so she can juggle for everyone. So friends, if you have any more burning questions and you want to get to know us more...

Olivia Fuller:

You can find us on Facebook and Instagram at Farming\_Basics, and reach out to us with any questions about our background, about what we've got going on, that we can provide for you through our resources that we bring to the state. Thanks so much for listening.

Jacob Kelley:

Bye.

Speaker 1:



This has been a production of Alabama Extension at Auburn University.