NO-TILL ORGANIC MARKET GARDEN

Producer Case Study

SWEETER ROOTS, STRONGER SOIL

The Story of Tanji Jefferson and Vunny T's Farm
Caddo Parish, Louisiana



USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

NO-TILL OMG! Organically Managed Gardening

CAMPTI Field of DREAMS

Growing Confidence Through Healthy Soil

For Tanji Jefferson, farming began with a simple goal: grow healthy food for herself and her community.

Located in Shreveport, Louisiana, Vunny T's Farm is an urban growing operation where Tanji cultivates vegetables, herbs, and sugar cane while exploring practical ways to produce nutritious food using regenerative agriculture principles.

Like many beginning farmers, Tanji's journey started with enthusiasm but also uncertainty. Before joining the No-Till Organic Market Garden project, she relied on conventional tillage methods, purchasing a tiller and preparing the soil the way many new growers are taught.

The experience was discouraging. Tilling was physically demanding, time-consuming, and often produced disappointing results. Despite her efforts, early crops struggled, and she began searching for a better approach.

That search led her to the No-Till Organic Market Garden project.

Through workshops, technical assistance, soil testing, demonstrations, and peer-to-peer learning, Tanji was introduced to a system that challenged many of her assumptions about farming. Instead of repeatedly disturbing the soil, she learned how mulch, compost, tarps, and biological soil-building practices could work together to create productive growing spaces with less labor and fewer inputs.

The results were immediate enough to capture her attention. What began as a desire to grow food soon became a passion for understanding how healthy soil could transform the entire growing process.

"I thought farming had to be hard. No-till showed me that working with nature can be easier than fighting against it." —Tanji Jefferson

Learning Through Innovation

Discovering a Better Way

One of Tanji's most memorable experiences came during her first successful watermelon crop.

Before adopting no-till practices, watermelon production had been disappointing. Plants struggled, fruit remained small, and harvests rarely met expectations.

After implementing practices learned through the project, the results looked very different.

Healthy vines spread across mulched beds, and watermelons began appearing throughout the planting area. What started as excitement over a single successful melon quickly turned into surprise as more fruit appeared beneath the vines.

For Tanji, it was proof that the system worked.

The project introduced her to a variety of regenerative practices, including:

- No-till production methods
- Compost applications
- Mulching
- Tarping for weed suppression
- Soil health monitoring
- Biological soil-building practices

These techniques helped reduce labor requirements while improving growing conditions.

Perhaps most importantly, the project changed the way she viewed soil. Rather than seeing soil as something that needed to be constantly worked and disturbed, she began to understand it as a living ecosystem capable of supporting healthy plant growth when given the right conditions.



In addition to watermelon, Tanji planted Roselle (pictured), sugar cane and Ashwaganda.

Key Findings

- Successfully transitioned from tillage to no-till production
- Improved watermelon production and crop performance
- Reduced labor requirements for bed preparation
- Increased understanding of soil biology
- Adopted mulch-based production systems
- Expanded confidence as a beginning farmer
- Developed a stronger connection to regenerative agriculture

Building Healthy Soil

Letting Nature Do the Work

One of the most valuable lessons Tanji learned through the project was that healthy soil does not need to be constantly disturbed to be productive.

Instead of relying on mechanical tillage, she began using tarps, mulch, compost, and organic matter to build soil naturally.

The approach was simple.

Tarps suppressed existing vegetation.

Organic matter decomposed beneath the surface.

Mulch protected the soil from heat and moisture loss.

Compost fed soil biology.

Together, these practices created growing conditions that were healthier and easier to manage.

As soil health improved, Tanji observed better moisture retention, healthier crop growth, and more consistent production.

The changes were particularly valuable during Louisiana's hot summer months, when maintaining adequate soil moisture can be a significant challenge.

She also discovered that reducing soil disturbance meant spending less time fighting weeds and more time growing food.

For a beginning farmer managing an urban operation, those efficiencies made a meaningful difference.



Tanji could see the soil improvement when she participated in the “Soil Your Undies” challenge.

"The tiller beat me up. No-till let the soil do the work." – Tanji Jefferson

Growing a Farm and a Community

Sharing the Harvest

Although Vunny T's Farm operates on a small urban scale, its impact extends beyond the growing area itself.

Through social media, conversations with neighbors, and interactions with customers, Tanji has become an advocate for making food production more approachable.

Her enthusiasm for growing food is contagious.

Whether discussing watermelons, herbs, vegetables, or sugar cane, she encourages others to see farming not as something reserved for large rural operations, but as something that can happen in backyards, neighborhoods, and urban communities.

Sugar cane became one of the farm's most distinctive crops.

Deeply rooted in Louisiana's agricultural history, sugar cane allowed Tanji to connect modern regenerative practices with traditional Southern foodways. The crop became a reminder that healthy soil can support both innovation and cultural heritage.

As her confidence grew, so did her willingness to share what she learned.

Like many participants, she discovered that some of the project's most valuable outcomes were the relationships formed through workshops, field days, and conversations with fellow growers.

The experience reinforced the idea that successful farming is often built on shared knowledge and community support.

> *"If you're thinking about growing food, just jump in and do it. You'll be amazed at what happens."*

Looking Forward

Growing Possibilities

Today, Tanji continues building upon the knowledge and experience gained through the No-Till Organic Market Garden project.

Healthy soil remains at the center of her growing philosophy.

The practices she adopted have made farming more productive, more enjoyable, and more sustainable. They have also provided the confidence needed to continue expanding her skills as a grower.

Looking ahead, Tanji hopes to continue refining her production systems, increasing food production, and demonstrating that regenerative agriculture can succeed in urban environments.

Her journey illustrates one of the most important lessons of the project: Farming does not have to begin with hundreds of acres, expensive equipment, or generations of agricultural experience.

Sometimes it begins with a small plot of land, a willingness to learn, and the courage to try something new.



Creative use of vertical growing systems allowed Tanji to increase production within a limited urban growing space.

Key Themes from Tanji Jefferson's Journey

- Urban Agriculture
- Beginning Farmer Development
- Soil Health
- Regenerative Agriculture
- Food Self-Reliance
- Small Farm Entrepreneurship
- Knowledge Sharing
- Community Resilience

Key Lessons Learned

- Healthy soil reduces work while improving results.
- No-till systems can be productive and practical.
- Small urban farms can make meaningful contributions.
- Learning from other farmers accelerates success.
- Confidence grows alongside healthy crops.

Closing Reflection

Tanji Jefferson's experience demonstrates that regenerative agriculture can make farming more accessible, productive, and rewarding. Through curiosity, persistence, and a willingness to embrace new ideas, she transformed an urban growing space into a thriving example of what healthy soil can accomplish. Her story reminds us that every successful farm begins with a single decision to plant, learn, and grow.