

Rooted in legacy: Two FAMU students use campus garden to reconnect peers with agriculture

By Starr McKay



TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — In a quiet space behind agricultural buildings at Florida A&M University, rows of leafy greens push through the soil under the North Florida sun. Students walk past the small garden every day on their way to class, often without noticing it.

But, for the students who planted it, the garden is something much bigger than vegetables growing in the ground.

For Dillon Ford and Aaron Francis, the space is about reconnecting their peers to a part of the university’s identity that many students overlook.

“A lot of students come to FAMU, and they do not really understand what it means that this is a land grant university,” Ford said. “Agriculture is part of the reason this school exists. Without agriculture, there is no foundation for what FAMU was created to do.”

The garden began as a simple idea between the two students, but it quickly turned into a personal mission. Both said they realized many students on campus, even those who eat in the dining halls every day, rarely think about where their food comes from or the people and knowledge behind it.

“Most people see food when it is already prepared or sitting on a shelf at the store,” Francis said. “They do not always think about the science, the labor and the generations of knowledge that go into producing it. Agriculture touches everything in our lives, but people do not always see it.”

Florida A&M University is one of the nation’s historically Black land grant universities, established under the Morrill Act of 1890, which expanded higher education opportunities for Black students and emphasized practical fields such as agriculture, engineering and science.

That history lives on through the FAMU College of Agriculture and Food Sciences, where students study everything from animal science and agribusiness to environmental science and food technology. The college operates extension programs that work with farmers and communities across Florida.

Yet, Ford said many students on campus are not fully aware of how central agriculture has been to the university’s mission.

“There are thousands of students here who may never step into the College of Agriculture,” Ford said. “They might not realize the role it has played in the history of this university or how many opportunities it offers.”

That realization motivated Ford and Francis to create something visible and accessible to the broader student body.

They began building the garden as a hands-on learning space where students could see crops grow in real time. The goal was not simply to produce vegetables, but to spark curiosity.

“When someone walks past and stops to ask what we are growing or how long it takes for something to mature, that is the moment the learning starts,” Ford said. “Even something as simple as seeing a tomato plant grow from a seed can shift the way people think about food.”

For Francis, working in the soil has also changed his own perspective.

“When you plant something yourself and you watch it grow over time, it gives you a deeper respect for the process,” he said. “It reminds you that food does not just appear in the grocery store or in the dining hall. There is knowledge, science and patience behind every harvest.”

The garden reflects the broader mission of land grant universities, which were designed to connect education with real world solutions and community impact.

For generations, historically Black land grant institutions like Florida A&M University have played a key role in agricultural research, food systems and community development across the South.

Ford said he hopes the garden can remind students of that legacy while also encouraging them to explore careers they may not have considered.

“Agriculture is not just farming,” Ford said. “It is business, technology, environmental science and food security. There are so many career paths connected to it that students may not even realize.”

As the plants continue to grow, Ford and Francis hope the small garden will become something larger than the space itself.

They want it to be a conversation starter.

“If students walk past and start thinking differently about where their food comes from or what agriculture means for our communities, then the garden is doing its job,” Francis said.

For Ford, the message is simple but powerful.

“Agriculture affects everyone whether they realize it or not,” he said. “Once people understand that, they start to see why it matters.”