

## **PLANT PEOPLE Season One Episode Nine ‘The African American Garden’ Transcript**

**JENNIFER BERNSTEIN NARRATION:** I'm Jennifer Bernstein, President and CEO of the New York Botanical Garden. On an unseasonably hot day in May, I walked through an important garden on our grounds with the very person who brought it to life.

**JESSICA HARRIS:** Well, hi! I'm Jessica Harris. I am actually a trustee here at the Garden and I work with the Garden on the African American Garden, which has been a three-year project that we have worked on about celebrating, saluting, and remembering the contributions of African Americans in not just the United States sense, but in the hemispheric sense.

**JENNIFER NARRATION:** Dr. Jessica B. Harris is a titan in the culinary world. Among her many honors, she's been included on TIME's list of Most Influential People, and her book “High on the Hog” was adapted into a major Netflix series. The African American Garden at NYBG expands on her work in a novel way.

**JESSICA:** Well, it's in many, many ways a living, growing embodiment of a lot of the things that I've written about in terms of the transitioning and the movement of plants and foodways from the African continent through basically the hemisphere. And so it's so much fun to watch things sprout and come up and, you know, poke their little green noses through the soil.

**JENNIFER NARRATION:** This season on Plant People, we've explored the many ways plants need people, and people need plants. NYBG's African American Garden is the embodiment of that idea. The plants here tell stories of suffering, resilience, joy, and connection. Every day, we welcome visitors into the space to experience those stories for themselves. And today, you're going there too.

**JESSICA:** That one is a banana.

**JENNIFER BERNSTEIN:** Let's talk about the banana tree. And let's stand in the shade.

**JESSICA:** I was gonna say – or, let's sit down.

**JENNIFER NARRATION:** The African American Garden sits near NYBG's East Gate. And even though the Bronx is just steps away, this is a place where you can immerse yourself in plants...even tropical ones.

**JENNIFER:** It's early in the season, but it's already tall.

**JESSICA:** Well, it's coming up. It's gonna get a little bit taller than that. And this banana tree is kind of, well, he's happy, but he's not absolutely thrilled. I think he's just been set out. We are having a very interesting spring weather-wise in New York City.

**JENNIFER:** Lots of water.

**JESSICA:** Lots of water and unanticipated heat. And so the plants are probably doing their variation of what I'm doing, which is their heads are spinning around going, what's going on? What's going on? Is it summer? Is it spring? What's happening? And this banana tree kind of looks like that a little bit. But he's coming along and we're going to send him some good wishes and growth love.

**JENNIFER:** Yeah, and he'll get bigger throughout the season he'll stand tall in this garden.

**JESSICA:** Absolutely. Absolutely. Stand tall and maybe even give us a hand of bananas.

**JENNIFER:** Yeah, that would be great. So you may hear because we're out here in the Garden, the roadway in the distance, we're definitely in The Bronx. When you're in the Garden you can feel like you're a world away, but we are in the middle of this borough of New York City. What do you think it means to have this garden here in the Bronx?

**JESSICA:** I think it's extraordinary. I mean, one of the people kept a book of guests, a guest book. And some of the comments were just heartrending, heart filling, heartbreaking. People were so thrilled, so excited, so gratified at having been seen.

It made people really feel that they had been acknowledged in a very different way. There's a tale that one of the people who works at the [Edible] Academy told about a gentleman, and we have no idea his name or where he may have been from, but we think he was a gentleman from Africa, and he would come every day. And he would sit in one of the chairs that kind of ring the perimeter, take off his shoes, sit down, put his feet up and say, "This garden is mine." And I think that's the kind of effect it had on many people here. And I'm so thrilled about that.

**JENNIFER:** So we're standing in front of this bed, which is telling a sort of economic story. Can you talk about that?

**JESSICA:** Exactly. In this bed, we deal with the plants that drove the slave trade, basically. We've got tobacco, we've got indigo, we've got cotton, we've got all of the plants that kept the trade moving because people were needed to work them agriculturally.

**JENNIFER NARRATION:** The African American Garden was a three-year project, and it's currently celebrating its third and final year. The theme has changed each year to explore a different aspect of the African Diaspora.

**JESSICA:** The first year we talked about the African American experience in the sense of the United States. Southern influences, southern culinary influence, southern cultural influences. With those influences, we selected about 80 plants that talked about everything from plants that drove the slave trade, to plants that were used to make things, plants that could cure and plants that could kill. And that iteration moved into the Caribbean last year. However, instead of the 80 plants, we had about 140.

**JENNIFER:** Yes, the plant list keeps growing.

**JESSICA:** The plant list does keep growing, and so this year, they're trying to hold it to about 180. So we've got an expanding range of plants.

**JENNIFER NARRATION:** Dr. Harris says she became a plant person by way of the food world.

**JESSICA:** The anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston used to always say that she told history through the spyglass of anthropology. I guess being a food historian or a culinary historian means that I tell history through the spyglass of food. Food is essential. The human condition requires food. If we don't eat, we die. It's that simple. So, food is in everything. You can look at food in Marco Polo's diaries. You can look at food in Columbus's diaries. You can look at food in all of the explorers on whatever continents they were exploring. People somehow or other always somewhere in the back of their mind are wondering, "What's for dinner?"

And that then influences, in some cases, what they write about. What's for dinner, what I wish I had for dinner, and so on and so forth. So, looking at that is kind of what made me a food historian. Looking at that specifically in the African Atlantic

world, gave me my area of specialty, if such a thing exists, and then the whole notion of how it affects us all, and it certainly took me into plants.

**JENNIFER:** That all makes sense. So you study the ties between plants, food, and African American traditions and culture. How can food and plants tell us more and help us better understand the story of the African diaspora?

**JESSICA:** Well, I mean, I have said, and it's probably not original, but the history is on the plate. So if you look at a plate, you'll find the history. If you take what many people consider to be a kind of traditional African American plate, on it, you'll probably find collard greens. Well, collard greens, ironically and interestingly to many people, are not African in origin. They're Northern European. Collard is a corruption of colwart, and colwart is any non-heading cabbage. But they are cooked in the same manner as many of the greens of the African continent, and so the Africanism is in the manner of the cooking, not necessarily in the plant itself.

You swing back and forth with things like that. If you took, for example, peanuts. Peanuts are actually New World. Peanuts are from this hemisphere, but they go to the African continent, they basically take over from a native African legume called the Bambara groundnut. And so they then return to the northern part of this hemisphere.

And so you get all sorts of things like that, and you can tell all of those kinds of histories from the plate.

**JENNIFER:** Yeah, it's amazing to understand history through food and through plants. You've noted that enslaved people brought with them significant plant knowledge, and in many cases they also brought seeds when they were brought to the Americas.

**JESSICA:** Well, I want to kind of correct some of that. Nobody got a chance to pack. If you packed, you wouldn't have been on that ugly ship. So bringing seeds is probably not exactly how it happened. Seeds were brought. Seeds were brought because people had to be nourished or at least maintained alive on that transatlantic journey.

And so, a lot of the plant stuff that came, came as provisions. Rice was brought on board to provision ships, but then when it was unused, some of the unprocessed rice became seed rice. So you get things that happen that way.

**JENNIFER:** Right. That's important. Enslaved people arrived with plant material that they then made use of. And what are some of those stories?

**JESSICA:** The classic ones are certainly the agricultural knowledge behind rice. The African continent has its own rice, *oryza glaberrima*, as opposed to *oryza sativa*, which is the Asian rice we know. And while that rice did come and was used it wasn't the rice that built the wealth of South Carolina.

The wealth of South Carolina came out of *sativa* for the most part, but the thing was that the agricultural know-how, the growing of that rice, the building of those dikes, the flooding and unflooding and regulating of those fields, was African agricultural knowledge. I have heard that there are only a few, I think, two or three man-made things that can be seen from space. One is the Great Wall of China. The other is the transformation of the coastal areas of the low country, South Carolina and Georgia, that were done by the enslaved Africans to make those rice fields. So I always think that's pretty amazing.

**JENNIFER:** That is amazing. It's extraordinary. It tells you a lot about the scale of what was happening then. Yeah. And I've heard you say that slavers knew about this agricultural knowledge.

**JESSICA:** Oh, absolutely. They were very astute. They knew about, not necessarily the deep cultural bedrock of Western Africa, but they knew that people in this area grew and ate this, that, and the other. They had to know it to provision the ships because they provisioned the ships based on the enslaved Africans, on the captives, on the kidnapped people. They provisioned them based on their knowledge of what they ate.

So people from the so called 'Grain Coast' required grain. That would have been rice. People from lower down, the Bight of Benin and so on and so forth, required yams.

All of that knowledge was part of what came as well, because that knowledge, that provisioning—new yams grow from old yams, and so what remained of the yams could be planted. New rice can be processed from rice that hasn't been processed, can be planted, it can become seed rice.

That happened. Okra, the pods yield seeds, so you've got all of those things that then could and did lead to African plants becoming part of the botanical profile of the American South and arguably North.

And so much of the current American diet has been influenced by those changes. Some of these plants have become central to our understanding of the current American food landscape. Can you give a couple of those examples?

**JESSICA:** One of the great debates in dietary worlds is the use of sugar. We are all, in many ways, addicted to it.

It originates in New Guinea, and then makes its way through South Asia into the Mediterranean basin and from the Mediterranean basin to the New World. Cane arrives early, it arrives with Columbus on his second voyage, 1493. It makes instead of the traditional one crop a year, I think there are actually two crops a year, but whatever it is, it thrives.

And in its thriving, it creates a place that then becomes the epicenter for the European world, because also as a result of those Colombian voyages, we see coffee, which is actually African in origin; tea, which is Asian; and chocolate, which is American, become status drinks of Europe. But all three of those drinks require sweetening and so sugar just explodes. Sugar being the process from cane, but cane is brutal.

**JENNIFER:** Mm.

**JESSICA:** It's horrific to work. And it brings with it, wherever it goes, in the world, that whole march from South Asia through the Mediterranean, through and to the Americas, cane brought with it enslavement. And just as an architectural note, it also brings with it Palladian architecture. So you get all of those columned white houses that march right along with cane.

**JENNIFER:** Yeah, this year's garden includes a feature where people can walk into the cane, which I think is amazing.

**JESSICA:** One of the things that was suggested was to create a way that people could experience a cane field. It will by September be dense enough so that when you walk in – and there is a poem about sugar cane located in the middle of that garden – but when you walk in, you will feel what would have been like to work in a cane field.

I mean, we've even had to post a few signs that say “Careful, don't touch.” Cane is razor sharp. Cane will cut you. Cane has like little bladed things. It blots out the sky. And so working in a sugar cane field was horrific. Not to even discuss the processing then from cane into sugar.

**JENNIFER NARRATION:** After the break, we'll learn about how some of the plants of the African American Garden were prepared for eating throughout history, and what that teaches us about the African Diaspora. Plus, why it's important to cultivate your own garden. We'll be right back.

[BREAK]

**JENNIFER NARRATION:** Welcome back to Plant People. I'm Jennifer Bernstein and I'm speaking with food historian Dr. Jessica B. Harris. Plants are not the only things on display at NYBG's African American Garden. In the final bed, a tree-like structure stands tall, adorned by brightly colored bottles in blues, greens, yellows and pinks. This is a bottle tree.

**JENNIFER:** So we're standing in front of the bottle tree. Can you explain what it is, who built it, and what significance it has in this garden?

**JESSICA:** Well, a bottle tree is a traditional South Carolinian Gullah Geechee form. And they are protective. Usually, it's a dead tree of some sort. Sometimes the bottles hang down. Sometimes the bottles are put on the branches. And so, as we were finishing the first year of the garden, it's like, you know what? We need a bottle tree to protect that. And then Toby Adams, who is the the head of the Edible Academy came up with a brilliant idea and he went to one of the local high schools where they did metalworking courses and had the students make a bottle tree out of rebar.

And that was the first year was just the bottles. For the second year to celebrate the Caribbean, we decided we would add some gourds because gourds were so much a part of the cultural life of the Caribbean and Central American zone. And this year, you have come to the Garden to see what goes up. We're adding a third element to it.

**JENNIFER:** That's right.

**JENNIFER NARRATION:** So far on our walk through the African American Garden, we've learned about the journeys of plants across the African Diaspora. But we haven't yet talked about how these plants were cooked. Dr. Harris said that many West African culinary traditions revolve around fire.

**JESSICA:** If you put three rocks on the ground, build a fire in between the rocks, put a pot on those rocks, what can you do? You can certainly grill. You can,

arguably, toast, you can stew, or boil. You can roast in the ashes, And you can fry in deep oil. You can't sauté.

But if you think about that, all of those techniques are techniques in which the African Atlantic world and the peoples of the African Atlantic world excel. The barbecuing, the stewing, the deep fat frying.

I mean, southern fried chicken, guess what? Fried in deep oil, that was one of those culinary techniques. The cooking long, low, and slow. And the consumption of the liquid in which they were cooked, which is sometimes called the pot likker, spelled L-I-K-K-E-R, please, is also a part of some of the Africanisms in that cooking realm.

And then you find that there are even dishes that maintain, in some way or another, their traditional names from their places of origin.

For example, the classic dish from New Orleans everybody knows is gumbo. But people don't necessarily know that the word “gumbo” more than likely comes from one of the Bantu languages in which okra, a key ingredient in many gumbos, not all, is called *ochingombo* or *kimgombo*.

And if you go to Paris today and you go to a market on the Rue Mouffetard or any of the open markets and you see okra, it's called *gombo* in French, so you get all of those things that the etymology connects for you as well.

**JENNIFER:** Yeah, I can see why you've gone so deeply into this world. The connection between the history of language, the history of people and culture and the ecological history. They're all so interwoven. It's incredible, you know.

**JESSICA:** Absolutely. And I have said, the deeper you get into the study of food, the more you get into ethnobotany.

**JENNIFER:** Mmhmm.

**JESSICA:** Because you start wanting to know about plants.

**JENNIFER:** Mmhmm. Indeed. So, let's talk a little bit more about the garden itself this year. What are some of your favorite plants in the garden?

**JESSICA:** Well, I think everybody on the team knows now we're going to have okra every year. It is kind of my totemic plant. I love okra. It is in everything, that I



do in some way or another, because I think it, it kind of represents, in some ways, the ubiquity of the Africans in diaspora. From ironically the Bhindi Bhaji in India and South Asian food, which is okra, all the way through to the sopa de quimbombó, which is an okra soup in Puerto Rico. And then you find okra pretty much throughout the African Atlantic world. And that's pretty incredible.

**JENNIFER:** Yeah, it is. It is incredible. It's powerful to think about one plant being able to tell you the history of such a wide range of people across such a wide range of geography.

**JESSICA:** But I mean, you can almost pick any plant, and if you start going into it, it's like, oh my lord, who knew? I mean, coffee from the Ethiopian highlands, its genesis all the way into the Arabian Peninsula, then back, over the river, through the woods, and around and around.

It's just amazing when you look at the journey of some of these plants. That sugarcane I talked about earlier, from New Guinea all the way through South Asia. It's in India, in, I can't tell you what year, but way, way, long, long, long, long, long time ago.

Cane is one of the first plants that people started processing. So you find that the equipment for grinding cane is one of the first sort of technologies that people used to get what they wanted from a plant. Which is what Alexander the Great called sugar from a reed kind of thing. The reed being cane. You find all of these things that are just so fascinating, so amazing. It's just pretty extraordinary.

**JENNIFER:** Is there a food plant that you haven't had the opportunity to go deep into the history of that you're particularly intrigued by right now?

**JESSICA:** There are eight million probably. I am an individual who spent 50 that would be 5-0 years teaching English in the SEEK program at Queens College, CUNY in New York City. So all of this was my hobby. There are a ton of plants I'd like to go into further, and I'd like to further my knowledge of some of the plants that I have sort of cursory knowledge of. So yeah, it's the work of ten lifetimes.

**JENNIFER:** Yeah. What do you think about the current movements that are popping up around food these days? I mean, I've seen the engagement with the garden and some of the chefs and farmers that have come and been a part of the programming that we've done. What are you seeing out there?

**JESSICA:** Well, I mean, I think that we are certainly, as a nation of United States-ian people, increasingly understanding of the linkages between farm and table or botany and table. In some countries that connection, that linkage, was never lost to the same degree that it was lost here.

Certainly in the Caribbean there is immediate connection because, well, there's still markets. They're still open markets. They don't call them "farmer's markets." They're just "the market," and as opposed to the supermarket. But we've become, in the United States, such a people of supermarkets that we are now just getting back to the thing that used to be "the market."

You know, yesterday I went to the farmer's market. And it's a thing that I do. It's that Greek notion of "agora." You go to the market, yes, you go to shop, but you also go to greet friends, to be in community, to get news, to connect with folks. And so all of that is a part of how it works as well.

**JENNIFER:** We have a farmer's market that happens every Wednesday here in the summer at NYBG and it is a real community moment.

**JESSICA:** Oh, absolutely! And at NYBG it's double fun because you get to not only see the produce or the stuff that you can conceivably eat but if you walk around the gardens you get to see it growing as well and then that's a whole 'nother valent, I mean that's the beautiful thing about the Edible Academy.

**JENNIFER NARRATION:** The Edible Academy is one of NYBG's education centers for children. Located just across the path from the African American Garden, it's a place where young people can get their hands dirty, helping us to plant, tend, and harvest fruits and vegetables.

**JESSICA:** Children learn and are very much involved with and can very much be connected to the soil to table, not just farm to table, but dirt, soil, this thing you put a seed in and "Oh my gosh, look at this, something is growing!" And then later, "Oh my gosh, look at this, it has a fruit, oh my god look at this, I can eat it!" And that total connection is just extraordinary.

**JENNIFER:** Yeah, we've talked to teachers who've said that they've brought school groups here and all of a sudden kids who refuse to eat vegetables on a normal day, are saying "yes" to the vegetables in front of them because they're participating in the life cycle of it and they can really understand it in a very different way. And you know, when you start to understand your food differently,

you become more curious about the whole system that produces it and about the history of that system,

**JESSICA:** Oh, absolutely. And not only children. But I mean the veterans programs, the veterans programs that you have at the Edible Academy – that we have at the Edible Academy, since I'm kind of a part of it, is amazing. People with PTSD who can find solace in soil. It's a healing thing, that ability to cultivate. You know, I think it was Voltaire at the end of *Candide* who said, “Il faut cultiver son jardin.” “You must cultivate your garden.” Uh, he wasn't referring literally to gardens, but I think it applies. So, you know, one must cultivate one's garden.

**JENNIFER NARRATION:** Each iteration of the African American Garden over these three years has included a selection of poetry curated by the African American poetry collective Cave Canem and poet Dante Micheaux. These poems give further voice to the people behind these diverse and historic plants, and their stories of migration, dispossession, and reclamation. As we finished our walk through the garden, I asked Dr. Harris if she would recite a poem from last year's Caribbean garden.

**JESSICA:** Well, okay. It's by Gustavo Pérez Firmat, who is a Cuban-American poet. He's from Cuba. And it's called “Bilingual Blues,” and I think that appeals mentally to a lot of people.

*Soy un ajiaco de contradicciones.  
I have mixed feelings about everything.  
Name your tema, I'll hedge;  
name your cerca, I'll straddle it  
like a cubano.*

*I have mixed feelings about everything.  
Soy un ajiaco de contradicciones.  
Vexed, hexed, complexed,  
hyphenated, oxygenated, illegally alienated,  
psycho soy, cantando voy:  
You say tomato,  
I say tu madre;  
You say potato,  
I say Pototo.  
Let's call the hole  
a hueco, the thing*

*a cosa, and if the cosa goes into the hueco,  
consider yourself en casa.*

*Soy un ajiaco de contradicciones,  
un puré de impurezas:  
a little square from Rubik's Cuba  
que nadie nunca acoplará.  
(Cha-cha-chá.)*

**JENNIFER:** Thank you. Thank you for that.

Well, Jessica, it's been so wonderful talking to you. Thank you for everything that you've done here at NYBG through this project, through your role as a Trustee. We're really grateful that you're part of this community.

**JESSICA:** Well, thank you very much. I am delighted to be a member of it. It's a good community to be a part of.

**JENNIFER NARRATION:** You still have time to stop by the African American Garden. This year, the garden explores the theme of “Diaspora: Same Boat Different Stops,” and the connections shared by all people of African descent throughout North America. Walk past beds of rice and indigo, reflect and read some of the poetry, and learn about how plants were integral to the history of the African diaspora. For more information on the African American Garden and Dr. Harris’ work, visit [NYBG.org](http://NYBG.org) and the show notes for this episode.

In the final episode of our season, we'll learn about decay and the end of a plant’s life cycle. Merlin Sheldrake will take us into the weird and wonderful world of fungi, and tell us why plants and people wouldn’t be here without it.

Plant People is a co-production of NYBG and PRX Productions. From PRX, Plant People is produced by Jessica Miller, Courtney Fleurantin, Genevieve Sponsler, Adriana Rozas Rivera, and Pedro Rafael Rosado. Field recording by Sandra Lopez Monsalve. The executive producer of PRX Productions is Jocelyn Gonzales.

From NYBG, Plant People is produced by Charlie Nork, Cosette Patterson, Matt Newman, and Kait Tyler.

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