



# **FARMER TO FARMER** *podcast*



## **EPISODE 168**

**Karen Washington of Rise and Root Farm on  
Self-Care, Managing Relationships, and  
Addressing Social Justice and Food Issues on  
a For-Profit Farm**

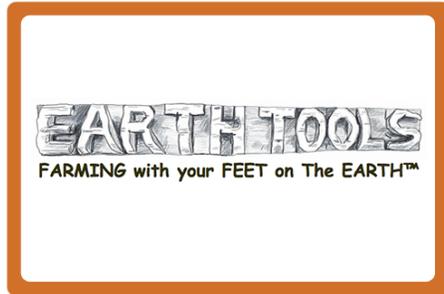
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Chris: It's the Farmer to Farmer podcast, episode 168, and this is your host, Chris Blanchard. Karen Washington owns and operates Rise & Root Farm with Lorrie Clevenger, Jane Hodge and Michaela Hayes located in Chester, New York, just a little over an hour from New York City. Karen and her partners raise an acre of produce to serve two New York City farmer's markets. Karen shares the story of finding land for farming in rural New York state. Now she and her fellow growers have made the transition from backyard urban gardening to commercial production. Karen digs into the nuts and bolts of how they address the social justice issues that are so important to them, while still tending to the needs of their for-profit farming operation. We also discuss the challenges of, and some strategies for, communication and managing farm relationships with love and healing, and how that's not always the easiest thing to do.

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Chris: Karen Washington, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer podcast.

Karen: Thank you so much. Happy to be here.

Chris: I'm really glad that you could join us today. Karen, I'd like to start off by having you tell us a little bit about Rise & Root Farm. Where are you guys located, how many acres of produce are you guys growing, and where and how are you selling that?

Karen: Yes. Welcome everybody. I belong to Rise & Root Farm. We are a women-run farm. Lorrie Clevenger, Michaela Hayes and Jane Hodge. We're located up in Chester, New York, which is an hour and 15 minutes from New York City. We're on three acres of land. Currently we are farming one acre, and the other two acres are being rotated and put into a cover crop. The first year, we tried to grow everything, which is really crazy. We're entering our fourth year. This year, we're starting to understand what the black dirt means, which is rich in nutrients. Now, we're focusing on growing heirloom tomatoes, edible flowers, flowers and herbs. We service two farmer's markets. We are at the Union Square Farmer's Market, which is located in Manhattan on 16th Street. We're there, and then we're located in the Bronx, called the La Familia Verde Farmer's Market on Tremont Avenue in the Bronx. Those are our two markets, as well as selling to restaurants. Yeah, that's us. Rise & Root Farms.

Chris: Now, you said that you're entering your fourth year of farming now in 2018, but this is your fourth year of farming at Rise & Root Farms. You've been involved in agriculture for much, much longer than that.

Karen: Yes. I started through community garden work, and also my backyard back in 1985, and really had no farming experience whatsoever. My parents weren't farmers. My grandparents weren't farmers. I just learned on the fly basically by reading books and going to the library. Then, when I got involved in the community garden back in 1988, I was surrounded by a lot of people who had farming in their blood, so I learned a lot from them. From my experience, as well as my partners' experience, we got a lot from working in our community gardens. A lot of hands-on work, understanding where our food was coming from, which is really, really important. We decided that we would give it a try and move up into farming on a larger scale. That's where Rise & Root came into play.

Chris: How did you make that transition from being a backyard urban gardener and working in community gardens to actually doing commercial production because you were growing vegetables for sale while you were still in the city, right?

Karen: Correct. Right, through my farmer's market, the La Familia Verde Farmer's Market, we developed what is called a farm cooperative, which we had five community gardens working together and producing food through those five community gardens. We started that back in 2004. 2004. Looking at the potential of growing food on a small scale, we also looked at the landscape of the food system in general and found out that the food that was in our neighborhood didn't compare to the food that we were growing in our community gardens. However, the food that we were growing in our community gardens wasn't enough. It was small. Thinking about how could we take the idea especially food and social justice that we were learning in the city, looking at the



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food system through the lens of hunger and poverty, how we could take that vision that we all had and really enlarge it on a larger scale.

Karen: We all had the idea that we wanted to do that. We wanted to grow on a larger scale, but keep in mind, we also wanted to bring with us a vision and mission of food and social justice. We got that opportunity of searching for land. It was hard. We took a whole year going up and down Hudson Valley looking for land, and a lot of times, it was prohibitive. The value of land is so, so expensive. There were many times when we just threw our hands up in the air and said you know what? We won't be able to make it because we just can't find land that is reasonable. I think this is a problem that a lot of farmer's, especially young farmers, are faced with today, the cost of land. We were lucky to meet a gentleman, Steve Rosenberg, who was really, really instrumental in helping us find land up in Chester.

Chris: What prompted the four of you to get together and start a farm? I mean-

Karen: I can answer that because in 2008, we went on a women's retreat. Believe it or not, it was 30 women who were on different aspects along the food chain. Some of us were farmers, some of us were activists, some of us ran non-profits. As women, all women, we decided to go the Grail upstate and do a farm retreat for three days. Just talking about, as women, what can we do to change the food system? What are our dreams? What are our hopes and desires? All of us talked about farming. All of us talked about farming, and then Jane, Lorrie and Michaela, Dee and Maggie, we all decided you know what? If this happens, we want to farm together. Molly and I went to California 2008, April 2008. We went to the Santa Cruz program, which is a six month program living in a tent learning how to grow organically. It's called CASFS, the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems which really, really teaches you how to grow food on various scales. It's a farm scale, it's an urban farm scale, it's an orchard scale.

Karen: When we came back, we had farming in our blood. The time was right where I was retiring from physical therapy. Jane was retiring from being the ED at Just Food. Michaela was just starting her Crock & Jar business, and Lorrie was just coming back from CASFS. She spent two years. It just seemed that the stars were aligned for all of us, and Dee and Maggie as well, they were about to leave their jobs working out at Ecostation in Brooklyn. The timing was right that you know what? Let's follow our dream. Grow NYC, the Farmer's Beginning Program, which is an excellent program, was very instrumental in us figuring that out. What the Farmer's Beginning Program helped us do was to think about a mission, think about a vision, and then think about dreaming big. Also, what they had for us was to think about all right, so if you want to farm, what does that take? A budget, capital, how to manage the farm, what are your strengths? Your weaknesses? Your opportunities? Your threats?

Karen: It was an excellent program that was a six month program. At the end, it was about dreaming big. What is your vision? As I look back on what our vision was, and when we took the Farm's Beginning Program in 2012, we had all said by 2014, we will have land, which we had, that we will be farming together, which we're doing. I think for any farmer that's out there that wants to think about farming, you have these tools. If you're in the city, you have the Grow NYC Farmer's Beginning Program that can really help you flush out what is it that you want to do in terms of farming, and then you tell people to go to as many places as you can and tell people what you want. Tell people that you're looking for land. We were lucky to be able to continue to put that message out that we were looking for land, and someone heard it.



- Karen: Advice for any new farmer to be is don't keep your hopes and dreams inside. Shout it out because there might be someone out there that is out there to hear it and willing to help you.
- Chris: That seems like something that you've talked about a lot over the course of your career about engagement with community. Okay, and maybe I'm casting stereotypes here, but it seems like not an easy thing to do for four women ... two of them are black ... to go into a rural community that's largely white and say, "Hey, we want to buy land and have a vegetable farm."
- Karen: Yes. That's why we had two white women who are our allies. Yes, there is that stereotype that's out there. Yes, there is. Race is definitely in the equation in the food system, which is predominantly white male oriented, but you know what? At the end of the day, even when we went up to Chester our first year of farming, there were farmers that laughed at us behind our back because we took the principles of putting raised beds, doing drip irrigation because if you look at the history of the black dirt region, it had so much moisture and so much organic matter that, at times, they were getting rid of water and not putting drip irrigation, but because of climate change and things that are changing, we started to do raised beds and also to do drip irrigation to help with conserving water, using mulch. At first, a farmer said look at these women who had the history of growing in cities, and now they're bringing their practices up here.
- Karen: When they saw what we were growing, and they saw our work ethic, our hard work ethic, at the end of the day, they stepped back and they really admired what we did. They just took us in as just other farmers because I think at the end of the day, they saw how hard we worked, and that how hard we worked in terms of being stewards of the land, and how we cared about what we were growing, intentional using organic practices in what we were doing. I think we definitely gained the respect of a lot of the farmer's. Then, during the second and third season when we started growing our heirloom tomatoes, especially in the high tunnel, a couple of farmers would come in and say, "Wow, you're growing the best tomatoes. Can you teach us how to grow tomatoes in high tunnels?"
- Karen: At the end of the day, it's really about working community. At the Chester Agricultural Center, we have four farms, and even though the four farms are independent farms, we do work cooperatively, and that means that we share the greenhouse. We share our common ideas, successes, failures. We share each other's equipment. Again, I would advise future farmers to think about working in community, which is really, really important because then farmers learn from each other, and then you learn to respect the work ethics that all of us are doing. Again, another piece of advice, if you can work cooperatively with other farmers, it's a plus because you learn a lot. I think any farmer that says that they are an expert, I tend to disagree with that because I feel that the only expert is Mother Nature. Mother Nature will tell you right from the start who's the boss.
- Chris: Tell me about Chester Agricultural Center. That seems like an interesting idea to me because the way you described it, it doesn't sound like it's an incubator program in the sense it's meant to funnel people through, but it sounds like more of a land access initiative?
- Karen: Yes. The Chester Agricultural Center was formed by investors. There are numerous investors that came up to Chester to purchase land with the hopes of really hoping



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beginner farmers. How it works is that you lease the land. You lease the land, and up in Chester where we are, which is in the black dirt region where the land is extremely, extremely rich with organic matter, we're leasing the land for about 450, 480 an acre per year. For us, it's reasonable. There's infrastructure there already, so we also lease the infrastructure. The greenhouse that's there, we have a cooling barn that's there, and we also pay rent on that. We lease that as well. If you look at the cost for young farmers to lease land in the Hudson Valley, we went to a meeting one time and the guy was saying how the closer you are to New York City, the more expensive land is.

Karen: He was talking about land being like \$50,000 to over close to a million dollars an acre. Most of that is close to the city, and most of that cost is for celebrity people that have the money that want to "be on farmland". They're really not farming. That was saddening to hear that, and then we go up along on the Hudson Valley and there were costs of \$200,000 an acre, and then there were some places that we would go that they really didn't know the soil structure in terms of the ability to grow vegetables. Then, there were some quirks that some people wanted us to farm their land, however, they had family members on the land. We could farm for free, but we had to make sure that we took care of the family member. There were a lot of quirks along the way, but again, we went out there and we traveled, and we visited farms, and we listened to people. Again, all the while, was putting out there we're looking for land, we're looking for land. Like I said, it was really Steve Rosenberg, from Scenic Hudson, who I happened to be sitting next to on a tour of the Hudson Valley. He said, "You know what? I may have someone that you need to speak to at the ." Folks, I know many times you're getting leads and after you had been searching for so long, and all of a sudden, someone gives you another lead, there's two directions that it goes. The first direction is that well, I've been trying, trying, trying and it's really getting expensive so why should I call this person for them to tell me again the land is so expensive, it's so far away. Then, there's the other voice that tells you give it a try. You have nothing to lose. At first, you're afraid, but you know what, we decided to call. We called, spoke to the guy at the time that was running the Chester Agricultural Center. He told us to come up to Chester, meet him at a diner, so we all went up at a diner. He took us to show us the lay of the land.

Karen: At the next meeting, we were meeting some of the farmers that were up there, and sitting down and listening to the other farmers that were going to be in this project, and listening to their work ethics. That they were stewards of the land, they believed in organic practices. We talked about our vision of food and social justice in terms of why we want to grow food to make sure that everyone has the right to the food that we're growing, being intentional about looking at farm labor practices to making sure that people who are treated, who work on the farm regardless of if it was our farm but in the Chester Agricultural Center as well, that the workers are treated humanely, that they're given a living wage in terms of how they're being paid, how they're being treated. By having that conversation, right then and there, we knew we were in the right spot.

Chris: That's a special thing to have that right spot in your community, and to be surrounded by people who are doing the same thing that you're doing with the same mission and goals as what you're doing because a lot of times I hear from growers about how isolating it can be to be an organic vegetable farmer out in a sea of conventional agriculture.

Karen: You can say that again. We hear those stories, and a day doesn't go by where we feel lucky and inspired. During the winter time when the snow was covering the ground, and



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then all of a sudden you see spring is right around the corner, you're itching to go back on the farm to be in that community. Right now, we are all working in terms of communities to build another high tunnel, and again, it's taking the work of all of us, all of the four farms that are up there build the tables that are going to be needed in the new greenhouse. Again, it's working in community, finding out what went well last year, what are some of the best practices that we can do this year. Another thing that we do, and again farmers that are listening, it's very, very important to look at self-care. I think what we do as a farm collectively is that on the weekends, we would take time off and go bowling. We would bowl together. We would have cookouts together.

**Karen:** To really understand that the work of farming is labor intensive, but also you have to put into your farming attitude the realm of self-care, because if you don't have self-care, you're going to burn out. You have to put in, and you have to. I know it's hard, but you have to put time where you are surrounded by family and friends and you do something that's completely different from farming. Going to the movies together, we do that. Go bowling together, we do that. Having barbecues together, we do that. Jane and Michaela have kids, and sometimes the farmers babysit. You have to have that realm of self-care so that you can then go back to number one, appreciate the fact that you are in a community of farmers, that you're helping one another and two, you have a better appreciation of the farming work that you do.

**Karen:** At the end of the day, you have people that have your back. You have people that have your back, and it just makes more humane the work that you're doing instead of just thinking that you're working at the farm constantly, constantly, constantly and you never take time to sit back and heal yourself. Heal your body, heal who you are in community, and really appreciate the love that you get from the people that you work with.

**Chris:** That was something I wanted to ask about. You mentioned earlier that you had a background in physical therapy, and in fact, you had retired from that in order to start Rise & Root Farm, and how that influenced your farming. Are there other ways that your background in physical therapy has influenced your farming practice?

**Karen:** Yes, definitely. Treating my patients who were in their 70's and 80's, who had farming backgrounds. I had patients who were from the Caribbean, from Latin America, who were from Europe, and most of them had farming backgrounds. Either they farmed, or their parents farmed, and now at the age of 70 and 80, they're relegated to processed food, fast food, junk food. They have Type II diabetes, hypertension or obesity. Now, the treatment is not a real change in diet, but the treatment was medication. What I would do is first of all, I was a physical therapist. I was a holistic physical therapist. That means that even though I was a hands on therapist, if I was going to treat my patients, I had to number one, look at what medication they were using and number two, what were they eating?

**Karen:** I would go into their house on my first evaluation, not only look at their medication, but go into their refrigerator and cupboard and say, "Okay, now you know you're a diabetic, or you're hypertensive. What are you eating?" Anything that had any fructose, glucose, and of the "ose" at the end meant sugar. I looked at the food, and anything that had sodium in it, that meant salt, and for them to look at what they were eating. Then, when we would have our farmer's market, I would sneak and bring them fresh fruits and vegetables and say to them, "This is what you're eating." They would tell me, "Oh, Ms. Washington. Farming is so hard." I'd say, "Yeah, but remember how food tasted?"



- Karen: Once I would ring that recollection of how they didn't go to the supermarket, how they got everything fresh from the farm, the eggs, the fruits and vegetables, they would sit back and they'd say, "Ms. Washington, you're absolutely right. The food was so much fresher, so much healthier. My parents lived to they were near 90 to 100. They hardly ever saw a doctor." Having that conversation with my patients made me lock in the relationship between food and health, and that the best medicine wasn't a prescription of pills, but the best medicine was the correction of their diet, what they were eating. From my field of physical therapy, which I loved. I loved my profession. I did that for 37 1/2 years, but what I found with the medical profession is that the emphasis was always on treatment, treatment, treatment. More medication, more medication, more medication and never on prevention.
- Karen: For me, I looked at farming as a tool of prevention, of growing food and getting people to understand the correlation between food and health, and that if you ate healthy, then you would not have some of diet-related diseases that you have now. That also pushed me toward advocacy and activism living in a low income neighborhood and seeing the food system, and where I lived, I was surrounded by fast food, junk food and processed food, and in having to, again, take that on and educate the people in my neighborhood to understand first of all where their food was coming from. Not from the grocery store, or from a [inaudible 00:28:17] from the ground, from the earth and getting them encouraged to want to grow food and be into gardens, and understand the relationship between food and health.
- Chris: How has that perspective influenced the ways that you've chosen to market the produce from Rise & Root farm?
- Karen: Excellent question because first of all, to educate people the fact that we're four farmers. Like you said, two of us are women of color, we're all women. Some of us are LGBTQ women. To put that out, first of all, so people can see who we are as farmers. Again, the farmer is white male, so when Lorrie and I would go to markets, people would assume that we were the help. That we weren't the farmers, so number one, to educate people of the fact that yeah, we're women. We're black women, and yeah, we are the farmers. We are the owners of Rise & Root farm. To educate them, because of the stereotype or the assumption, that's number one. Also, to have people understand that we are a farm, and that we do expect WIC coupons, Health Bucks.
- Karen: Even though maybe at one point we were at 14th Street in Union Square, and the other time we were at the farmer's market in the Bronx, we're reaching out to all people because as part of our vision and part of our mission is that everyone, no matter their ethnicity, no matter their income, everyone has a right to the food that we grow. It's not based on high end. We're not growing food for high end. We're growing food for community, and whatever the high end restaurant is paying for our heirloom tomatoes, or our edible flowers, or herbs, the people in the Bronx are privy the same heirloom tomatoes, the same edible flowers, the same herbs that high end people are getting as well. We want to make sure that people understand that. That the food that we grow, everyone has a right to purchase it and everyone has a right to eat it. We want to make sure that's clear of who we are as farmers.
- Chris: Do you charge different prices for your food in different market places?



Karen: Yes, we do. Again, we are a for-profit farm, but even though we are in the Bronx and it's "a low income neighborhood", there is a price for food. There's a price for our food. Farmers that are out there, you really have to educate a lot of consumers, especially if you are in low income neighborhoods that there's a cost in value for you as a farmer, and for your time, and for what you're bringing down. Now, I say that because in many low income neighborhoods, you're surrounded by a charity food system. A charity food system that is doing an excellent job in stemming the tide of hunger and poverty. However, we have to understand that the charity models are providing food through soup kitchens and food pantries, the great job that they're doing is supposed to be for emergency purposes. When you have people that are relying on that food system, and coming to a farmer's market, sometimes that idea of food is supposed to be free, or food is supposed to be low cost, figures into that mentality. What I've found in the 15 years that we've been working at our farmer's market is to educate people the value and cost of food. For example, we bring in our carrots. Our carrots are \$2.00 a bunch. When a customer comes up and says why am I paying \$2.00 a bunch for your carrots where I can get it from the store down the block that's wrapped in cellophane for \$.99? Or, I can get a bunch of carrots from the food pantry. I have to explain to that customer that these \$2.00 carrots that I have in my hand, I'm the farmer. I grew it. I put the seed in the ground. I took care of it, and I brought it down this 50 miles so that you can have it fresh. I pulled them up from the ground this morning, brought them down, and I'm the farmer who grew it.

Karen: Now, that \$.99 bunch of carrots that's wrapped in cellophane, number one, you don't know who grew it or how the farmer that grew it was treated. Was it sprayed with pesticide or insecticide? How long was it stored, either on a freight train or a tractor trailer? I can tell you that I'm the farmer that grew it. I used no pesticides or insecticides, and I'm bringing it to you fresh. That way the customer says you know what? I want something that's fresh. I want to meet the farmer that grew it, and I'm willing to pay the \$2.00 for that carrot. That is about educating. Now, the farmer's market that we have in the Bronx is going into its 15th year. We've built a customer base that understands what they're paying for. They're paying for the farmer's time. They're paying for the farmer's efforts, and they're paying for a quality vegetable that they're paying for. Having that conversation within community, especially low income community, is a win, win, win for us. It's a win, win, win for the consumer.

Karen: It takes a lot of education, but people want to be able to pay for something that is healthy, and knowing that that money that they're paying for helps us to stay in business. Helps us to come down 50 miles once a week to provide this. People understand that. Now, I'm not saying all people understand it because there's some people that say, "Ms. Washington, I understand it but I'm on a budget, and if I could afford it, I would." They understand. They understand that I'm a farmer bringing food down, and that there's a cost in value of the food that I'm bringing down for you to eat. I think a lot of what's missed in opportunity of talking to people about the cost and value of food, and making them understand as a farmer, we're workers. This is our income. We're trying to pay bills, put a roof over a head, provide for our families, and there's a cost in that.

Karen: To educate the consumer to understand that we're trying to make a living just like you're trying to make a living, that there's a cost in that, and that the food that we're bringing down is not free. It's not low cost. That there is a cost and a value to the food that we're bringing down.



- Chris: How do you decide how much you're going to charge for your produce in different markets?
- Karen: Well, the thing is that you look at what other people are charging at other stands. You hear what your other farmers are charging depending on the community that they have their farmer's market in. You also look around various stores and supermarkets, and other vegetable stands and see what they are charging, and really looking at that price, and knowing that you know what? You're going to up your price a little bit more because of the fact that you're bringing a product that's organically grown. You're bringing a product where the consumer is meeting the farmer that's growing, so you base a lot of the margin on that. On what other farmer's, in terms of the farmer's market, what are they charging for the same product you're bringing down, and then comparing that with what is being sold at local grocery stores or vegetable stores.
- Karen: Sometimes, let me tell you, the customers will tell you. Like I told you, they'll say, "Collard greens are \$.79 a pound. How come yours is \$2.00 a pound?" Then, another hook that we do sometimes on customers that are somewhat skeptical about purchasing, we will give them our heirloom tomatoes. Our heirloom tomatoes are a price. In a low income neighborhood, we will charge \$ 3.00 a pound for an heirloom tomato whereas maybe at high end market, you may charge \$6.00 or \$8.00 a pound. You know what we do? Sometimes, we will say, "You know what? Here's an heirloom tomato. Take it home. Come back." They will come back and say they never tasted anything like that and they're willing to pay that price. Same with our eggs. We sell eggs, because my garden, Garden of Happiness, we have chickens. We sell our eggs \$4.00 a dozen. Now, that's compared to \$.99 that you will find at the local grocery store. At Sea Town or Fine Fare, eggs will go maybe \$.99 a pound or \$1.99 a pound, or in some cases, they may even get them free at a food pantry.
- Karen: When we say \$4.00 a dozen, the customers say, "\$4.00 a dozen?" This is what we do. We say, "Okay, take two. We're going to give you these two eggs. Take them home." We can not even keep our eggs. Right now, people are signing up in the back of their head because now they've tasted our eggs, and that's the first thing that sells out. Our eggs. Once you give people a chance to taste the quality ... The quality of what you're bringing down can not compare to what they're getting at a local grocery store. When they say you know what? I'm spending \$.79 a pound, or \$.99 a pound for your collards, and you're charging dollars, there's no comparison. No comparison to the taste, no comparison to how it looks, how it stands up. Again, as farmers, you base it on your effort, your time, your value as a farmer, and make sure that the consumer understands that.
- Karen: They understand your time, they understand your value, they understand the time that you've taken to bring a good product, a great product, down for people to buy and for people to eat. People will pay for quality.
- Chris: It seems like part of when you talk about paying for quality, part of what you're helping your customers understand is an egg just isn't an egg. That there's more to it than just its egg-ness or its ability to fit into a recipe, that there's a whole other set of qualities around being an egg, or being a carrot.
- Karen: Correct. Also, it's great. Another quick point is to invite people to come to your farm. They want to see. You want to see where we get the eggs from. There's five community



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gardens. You can see where we get our produce from. You want to see where you get those carrots, where you get those collards, where you get those tomatoes. There's Rise & Root Farm. We're an hour and 15 minutes away from New York, and believe it or not, people do come. It gets so hectic at Rise & Root that we have now community days. The last Saturday of the month starting in May, we have community days because we had to control people coming up randomly to visit the farm once you put that invitation out there because it takes away from our work. Now we have allotted time so that we can manage visitors. The last Saturday of the month from March up until October, you go online. Let us know that you're coming and from 10:00 to 1:00 is a community thing where you got a chance to visit the farm, to get your hands dirty.

Karen: If you want to help out planting, pulling up weeds, or just have a place where you can just get away. One thing about our farm is that whenever there was a tragedy, we would open up our farm. If you need a place where you need to come and heal, especially what happened at the Pulse nightclub back in Florida a couple of years ago, where the LGBT community felt so wounded. We opened up our farm, and we told people if you need to come up and heal, a place for healing, a place to be in community of spirit, of community, come on up. A lot of people came up to our farm just to sit in community, just to look along the horizon and see the beauty of the farm and feeling that healing quality that a farm can bring. That's one aspect of our farm that we love, too. We've put it out there. If you need time just to get away, to be in a moment of comfort, that's what Rise & Root Farm is all about as well.

Karen: There are people that come up during community days that just need a place just to get away, to bring their family, to see where food is grown, but most of all, to see how beautiful the landscape is, and if you need that time of solitude that our farm can give you, that time of solitude as well. It's not always about growing food, but also about providing a place where people can need that sense of healing that we provide, which is important.

Chris: I love that. I think that is so important and such a valuable resource that you're providing to your community. You mentioned the Garden of Happiness. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Karen: Yeah. That's my roots, the Garden of Happiness. The Garden of Happiness was started ... As a matter of fact, this is our 30th year. It's a community garden that I helped found along with my community residents in 1988. It was a vacant lot. One of 10,000 acre lots in New York City, if you can believe that. Again, had no farming experience but really saw the ills of empty lots and garbage filled lots because I had moved into a brand new community, a brand new house back in 1988, and that lot was supposed to be additional homes. When the developer got there, he left it. For the first three years of living in a brand new community, right across the street was an eyesore. You would hear the words, and words can be very, very painful, that people would say. They would call us garbage. "Look at these people. They live in garbage. They live in filth. They're nothing but pigs." The fact that we weren't, and would clean that empty lot up, and then in the middle of the night, wake up and find it was filled with abandoned cars and tires.

Karen: It just took resilience of people to get together to turn that empty lot into a community garden, and we were one of the first projects of the New York Botanical Garden, the Bronx Green-Up program, that helped turn that empty lot into a community garden. For me, at first it wasn't about growing food but it was about growing community and beautifying the neighborhood. Once people started to see that the empty lot had



changed into flowers and bushes and shrubs and trees, and how beautiful that garden started to look, it changed the whole outlook of that community. For me, seeing that garden, started to learn about the ism's that were plaguing our community and our society. The racism, institutional racism, structural racism and environmental racism that you would commonly see in low income neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color, and learning that.

Karen: Then, also starting to get my activism together, and understanding that growing food wasn't enough. That growing food intersects so many social identities that were going out there. We had problems with unemployment, asthma, no heat and hot water in a lot of the apartment buildings. Learning all of that that was intertwined into that garden, hearing people unable to afford medical treatment, or out of work. Huge immigration population in our garden, and that having the rights to citizenship. This is what molded me. This is what I heard in my community, and instead of being complacent about it, really getting involved in activism and bucking the system, and calling out the injustices that I saw, and making it known to a lot of the politicians that were happening in my community and setting up meetings and meeting with them to say what was happening in our community was wrong, and that change had to happen.

Karen: For me, I learned a lot, and I continue to learn, from my community as I continue to live here in the Bronx, even though most of the time I'm living up in Chester. Two days out of the week during the farming season, I'm here in the Bronx, and I'm here in the Bronx during the winter time. I continue to be passionate about my activism work about ending the tide of hunger and poverty, of making people understand that everyone has a right to good food, to change the lens of how people look at people who are born in poverty, and to change the lens of people not looking at us in terms of needs and problems, but looking at us in terms of assessing and solutions. In order to be poor, you have to be strong because in essence, you make something out of nothing. You're handed nothing, and you make something out of it, so people to change that lens of what it is to live in poverty, to change the lens of what it is to be in a low income neighborhood.

Karen: I try to tell people time and time again, and hopefully I put it out in your show, to make people understand is that all we want ... You give people the resources, the tools, the capital, the ability to own businesses, to be entrepreneurs, you will see how that changes the whole landscape of low income neighborhoods. I think for too long we have looked in terms of need, and as a result is always well, what can we give? The handout, the handout, the charity mentality. I tell people don't give us a handout. Give us a hand in. Share your power. Share your resources, and if you do that, then people who were once deemed powerless now become powerful. I tell people out there that have power, that have resources that they need to share it or give it up. It's hard to do because power's a drug. It's hard to do. This is one of the talks that I talk to people about is about sharing and giving up power and sharing and giving up resources.

Karen: That's hard to do when so many people have been in power for so long. Now all of a sudden, you want to see people who have been impoverished, you want to share that power, you want to give them resources so that they have the equity to do what you're doing, have the equity and the ability now to have their own businesses, to be self-sufficient and self-reliant. Yes, that's difficult for people to see, especially to see people who are black and brown all of a sudden obtaining power and then to be on their own. It can be a scary thought for people who have been in power for so long. Believe it or not, that's the way it's going to go. Sooner or later, people who have been denied



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power are going to ... Either you need to share or it's going to be taken. Sooner or later, the tide will change and people will become more powerful.

Chris: When you talk about sharing power, sharing resources, how do you effect that with your community from Rise & Root Farm?

Karen: I think we do that in a number of things in terms of a work ethic. We have people in community that come up and work on our farms. You don't know who their economic status is. You don't know their educational statuses. You don't know their immigration status. You have a group of people working together, especially during our community days, and the intention is that they're working together to help us on the farm. It's getting people to understand that there is no difference. The person around you could be homeless, or could be poor, and the person next to you could have affluence. Yet, they're there working together, so when we talk about our farm and we introduce our mission and vision on our farm, we make people understand that you know what? You could be next to a person who is affluent. You could be next to a person who is poor. The bottom line is that we're all working here in community.

Karen: If we can work in community on our farm, then we can also change the social status that we're having in our world where we're starting to have a system of the have's and have not's. Making people understand that when you do have affluence, and you do have resources, how better it is to try to share it to those who don't have. What Rise & Root Farm does is to lay that foundation whereby when we have our community days and people come up is we always invoke that sharing mentality of people going around and talking about the work that they do, and then finding ways that if there's an ability to share that they can share. They can share their resources, they can be involved in what people are doing, and there's always lessons learned. When people leave the farm, there's always lessons learned about themselves but also about people in other communities, which is really, really good.

Chris: With that, Karen, we're going to stop here, get a quick word from a couple of sponsors and then we'll be right back with Karen Washington from Rise & Root Farm.

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Chris: Perennial support for the podcast is provided by Vermont Compost Company, makers of Fort Vee and Fort Light potting mixes. When you're growing transplants, all of the investments you made in plant materials, heat, labor and overhead depend utterly on the performance in the media where you expect your plants to grow. If you're an organic grower, you're probably using a media compost. You should be looking for the



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Chris: While they're making use of waste products, waste disposal is not their primary goal. Ingredients are sourced consciously and with the end in mind. The same goes for the everything else part. Like the best in art, everything in Vermont Compost's potting soils has a purpose, whether it's the chips of ocean blue granite, or the kelp that provides micro-nutrients and a little smell of the ocean. Fully compost to compost, top quality ingredients, and a real sense for the art and the science plant production combined with a real commitment to organic growing professionals to create a consistent product year after year. In something that's subject to as many variables as market farming, it's nice to have something you can count on. [VermontCompost.Com](http://VermontCompost.Com).

Chris: We're back with Karen Washington from Rise & Root Farm in Chester, New York. Karen, just before the break, you were talking about working in community, and you were talking about this in this larger sense of working with community members and having them participate in the farming and gardening operations, but you guys also are managing this farm in community. There's four of you working together. I've farmed alone, and I've farmed in a partnership, and I know that those two things are different, but my partnership was with one person. I'm always amazed when I hear about four people all farming together. How do you guys divvy up the work? How do you guys make decisions? How do you just make it all work without being in a constant state of commotion?

Karen: Well, let me tell you something. It's difficult, challenging and fun. First of all, we start from a place of love. There are times where there are certain decisions that have to be made that affect people's livelihood. There are disagreements that come up. You have four women. We are four women. We are four strong women. We're four opinionated women, so you learn how to navigate that. At times, it's difficult. At times, decisions have to be made in consensus. We meet once a month, and if something is really important then we'll meet sooner. We meet once a month, we have an agenda. We have to-do lists that we're supposed to be doing. We have checks and balances to make sure things are done. We have to communicate, and sometimes it's difficult because sometimes you don't want to communicate. You may have things that you don't want to say because you're afraid you're going to hurt people's feelings.

Karen: If you don't say what you feel, then what happens if you internalize it and that it becomes bigger. Bigger, bigger, bigger. Then, all of a sudden, you're walking around with a person that doesn't want to talk, that doesn't want to be involved. It's important to have those meetings, our meetings, and it's important to provide a space where you can be authentic and honest. Even though it may hurt feelings, but you have to be honest to make it work. Yes, it's difficult but so far we've learned to manage because then at the end of the day, when we're either exhausted or crying our eyes out, we all end up saying how much we love each other, how much work together, want to work together, going back to our mission and our vision of who we are, and making sure that we leave loving each other. I think that's really, really important. We came into farming as friends, and I know in some instances it doesn't work out.

Karen: The two worst things to do is work with family and friends. They tell you that all the time, but what we try to do is be honest. Sometimes, honestly hurts but you can't leave that hurt. Sometimes people say things and they hurt, and they leave the hurt. When



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you leave the hurt, there's never closure. You wind up being bitter. What we try to do is that when there is hurt, to acknowledge that but make sure that we come together and end it with love and healing, and not just leave it raw. I've seen that done. I've seen people say things and they leave that open wound, and they never close it. They just leave it and they walk away, never repairing it. We make sure that when things are said that is hurtful, or when decisions that are made that we don't agree on, that in the end of the day that we acknowledge that hurt, we acknowledge that disappointment and the way that things didn't go your way, and that we always make sure that that wound, or that disappointment, is taken care of because if not, then it can destroy a relationship.

**Karen:** It can destroy your business relationship. We had that in the beginning because before Rise & Root, there's four of us, we had six. It was Natalie, Jane, Michaela, Lorrie, myself but there was Dee and Maggie. There was six of us in the very beginning, and Dee and Maggie made a decision to go their own way to do Rock Steady up in Millington, New York. That was hard. That was hard because we thought that we were all going to farm together. At the last minute, they decided that they wanted to farm on their own and again, working on going through that, that traumatic break and how that would affect our farm. It took a lot of time, but again, we constantly talked through it. We constantly made sure that we would still remain friends. We constantly looked at our farm as sister farms. It happens. It happens, and there are times where it's difficult, but at the end of the day your friendship and love prevails. That's how we deal with it.

**Chris:** I think you used the term closing the hurt.

**Karen:** Right. Closing the hurt.

**Chris:** I guess I can imagine in a vague fuzzy way what that looks like, but can you give me an example of what closing the hurt has actually looked like at Rise & Root Farm? A situation that developed and then how it was resolved, how it was made so that people could move forward effectively in partnership.

**Karen:** Yeah. With Dee and Maggie, we didn't know what was going on. At the last minute, they come and say we've decided to go our own and purchase this land up in Millington. First, it's silent. It's like we didn't know. When did you make this decision? How did you make this decision by yourselves? We talked through it. First of all, we had a conversation over the phone, but then they came down and we met in person and we talked about it, why they felt that the decision was made? That it was an opportunity for them. The decision was made because they were given an opportunity that they had to jump on. They only had a few weeks to make that decision, and if they didn't make that decision, then that dream or that opportunity would be lost. On one hand, you're upset because we decided we're going to farm together. On the other hand, they were getting a great opportunity. You have to put yourself in our place. We said to ourselves well, if we were giving that opportunity, what would we do?

**Karen:** Would we grab once in an opportunity as well? Putting yourself in their position of getting a once in a lifetime opportunity to be owners of a farm that they were managing during the summer, and getting the help that they had from people on board to help with capital, to help with them getting it started. Again, it's something to think about. Then, having the talk with them ourselves, the four of us. Number one, we were hurt. Yes, number two, they didn't tell us til the last minute but then, the fact that they were given an opportunity that they couldn't pass on. Putting ourselves in their place made us



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understand, and then when they came down together to talk to us, to hug us, we cried together. In the end, we looked at it, you know what? We're happy for them. We're still connected. We still work together. We're sister farms. We still share resources. They still come down and help out on Rise & Root Farm. We still go up there to help on Rock Steady.

Karen: We realized that it made us stronger. It made us strong. In that instance, yes, we felt hurt. Yes, there were hard feelings, but then we put ourselves in their place and then we cried, and we hugged, and then we started to look at the bigger picture, how in essence, even though they're not part of Rise & Root, that Rock Steady is still part of who we are in terms of community and how we still work together, how we still share resources, and how we still visit one another, and how we still sleep over. We sleep over at Rock Steady. Rock Steady sleeps over in Chester. Again, that wound that was open, how we got together and how we've closed it. It takes big people. Let me tell you, there are some people who are stubborn. There are some people that are stubborn and set in their ways, and they don't want to forgive. They don't want to forgive so they continue to move on with that hate or that resentment. Let me tell you something. Hate and resentment, or revenge, it will eat at you.

Karen: It will eat at you because if you see that person, again, it stirs up that animosity. It stirs up that feeling that doesn't feel right. We wanted to be a place where when we see Maggie and Dee, we want to feel right. We want to hug them. We want to engage with them. If you don't close that wound, you have that bitterness, and the bottom line is you're left with that. You are the one that is left with that pain and that bitterness. The other person may not even feel it, but you're left with that and that eats away at you as a person. Who wants to live their life with pain and guilt and resentment that continues to eat away at who you are as a human being? That's a hard life to live. That's a hard life to live if you are continuing to live with pain and resentment and hurt. If you don't find a place for healing to take place, then you are going to develop ulcers. It's not a good place to be in.

Karen: I'm sorry to say it's not a good place to be in, to hold all that baggage, and to continue to hold it year after year after year because you never made closure. You never closed that wound. People out there listening, you got to close that wound because you as a person, you're carrying on that infestation that doesn't make you right as a person. There's something that's still missing, and until you close it, then you're not going to be whole as a person. That's just my two cents.

Chris: Karen, it seems like a related thing that you mentioned ... related but tangential thing that you mentioned earlier ... was this idea of checks and balances that you guys have in place to make certain that the work gets done. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Karen: We have a whiteboard up on the farm. If not the whiteboard, we have a sheet of things that need to be done. At our meetings, we have to-do lists. Now we're trying to get a truck. We're trying to get a 10 foot truck so that we don't have to always rent out a U-Haul, so we try to that. We're trying to now look at our organic certification. We're trying to think about labor. There's certain dues, responsibilities that we have to do. We make sure that those things are checked off. Work on the farm, there are duties, things that need to be done on the farm, so there's a list of things so that whoever comes to the farm early ... We go to the farm at different times ... If there's water that has to be done, if the greenhouse has to be watered, then that's on the list. If there's new planting that has to be done, that's on the list.



- Karen: What we do is we initial, put our initial next to that list of duties that need to be done, and then we're they're finished, we check it off. There's responsibilities that all of us have to do on the farm. There's a list that goes up of what needs to be done, and then we see what's on that list and we do it. Like I said, there's checks and balances that each of has to do. There's a responsibility as a whole to take care of the farm. If say, for instance, one of us is sick then we call each other to make sure that that particular chore that had to be done is being taken care of. Things happen. People get sick. Jane and Michaela, they have kids so sometimes they may have to go and pick up the children early because someone is sick so they couldn't finish a particular chore, so we have to make sure that the chore is finished.
- Karen: We have weekends off, so the latter half of Saturday we have off, Sunday we have off, but say for instance if no one is around on the farm to water the greenhouse, we'll get one of our farming partners to do that or vice versa. Say for instance if they have a long weekend, they will ask us to water the plants in the greenhouse. There are checks and balances, and then also, if you miss something or you don't show up, we call each other out on it. Fair is fair. If you were supposed to do a particular task and you don't do it, you are held accountable. You are called out. You just don't let things go without saying something. Again, that's not good, too, to let people just fly. You call it out. "You were supposed to do this. How come you didn't do it? At least you could've called one of us to take care of it. That can't happen again."
- Chris: I really like what you talked about about having the whiteboard that actually assigns the work to different people, or different people are taking responsibility by putting their initials next to things and making that responsibility public because I always think it removes the power dynamic from having to enforce that somebody's keeping their commitments because they've actually made a public statement about their commitments.
- Karen: Right.
- Chris: With that, I'd like to turn here to our lightning round, but first I need to get a word from one more sponsor. This lightening round is brought to you by BCS America. BCS two wheel tractors are often mistaken for just a rototiller, but it's truly a superior piece of farming equipment. Engineered and built in Italy where small farms are a way of life, BCS tractors are built to standards of quality and durability expected of real agricultural equipment. The kind of dependability every farm needs. I have worked with BCS tractors for over 24 years, and I wouldn't consider anything else for my small tractor needs. I am not the only fan. More than 1.5 million people in 50 countries have discovered the advantages of owning Europe's most popular two wheel tractor, and these really are small tractors with the kinds of features found on their four wheel cousins and a wide array of equipment. Power harrows, rotary plows, flail mowers, snow throwers, sickle bar mowers, chippers, log splitters and more. Check out BCSAmerica. Com to see photos and videos of BCS in action.
- Chris: Karen, what is your favorite tool on the farm?
- Karen: My favorite tool on the farm, gosh. I love weeding. I have this little hand tool for weeding. I have a little cart that I sit on, and this little weeding tool. Yeah, weeding tool.
- Chris: Awesome. What is your farming super power?



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- Karen: Wisdom. I'm the oldest. I'm the oldest [inaudible 01:16:46] the wisdom is a super power. Definitely.
- Chris: I like it. What's your favorite crop to grow?
- Karen: I love Swiss chard. I love Swiss chard.
- Chris: Really. Why Swiss chard? I don't think that when we've asked this question out of a 160 farmers that anybody has said Swiss chard.
- Karen: I know. Well, I grow collard greens because that's part of my culture but what I love to grow is Swiss chard, because I can make a mean Swiss chard dish. Oh, Swiss chard with white beans. Saute onions and garlic, okay? I like a little hot pepper and saute that. Then, I cut up the Swiss chard, and then I wilt the Swiss chard and then saute that. Then, I usually use a can of white beans and put it in there, and put it around. Oh my goodness. Delicious. Then, once the white beans are in there with the Swiss chard and the onions and garlic, then I take some grated cheese and grate it on top. All right, folks. Hit me with that recipe. Let me know how great it is, especially with the kick of the hot pepper, be it a jalapeno pepper, a serrano pepper. Hit me up and tell me that you did that recipe and it's slamming.
- Chris: I have a Swiss chard fiend in the house, and I think I know what I'm making for dinner tonight. Thank you.
- Karen: Definitely.
- Chris: Finally, Karen. If you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?
- Karen: That growing food gives you power. Don't be afraid. Put your hands in the soil. There's a connection. There's a DNA connection to all of us of growing food. If you have a hesitant about growing food, put your hands in the soil. You'll feel a connection. Growing food gives you power.
- Chris: Karen, thank you so much for being part of the Farmer to Farmer podcast today.
- Karen: This was absolutely excellent. Thank you all, and everyone, happy farming and happy gardening.
- Chris: All right. Wrapping things up here, I'll say again this is episode 168 of the Farmer to Farmer podcast. You can find the notes for the show at [FarmertoFarmerPodcast.Com](http://FarmertoFarmerPodcast.Com) by looking on the episodes page, or just searching for Washington. That's W-A-S-H-I-N-G-T-O-N. The transcript of this episode is brought to you by Earth Tools, offering the most complete selection of walk behind farming equipment and high quality garden tools in North America, and by Osborn eQuality Seeds, a dedicated partner for growers. Visit [OsborneSeeds.Com](http://OsborneSeeds.Com) for high quality seed, industry leading customer service and fast order fulfillment. Additional funding for transcripts is provided by North Central SARE, providing grants and education to advance innovations in sustainable agriculture.



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