

Keeping a PROMISE

PHOTOS BY KIM MAXEY

“Never let go of that pea,” his Aunt Maddie would always tell J.T. Harris.



He didn’t—and he also did one better.

A few years ago, after a visit to Baker Creek, J.T. sent a handful of his family’s heirloom clay peas (a cowpea) to us from his East Texas farm.

“I tremble, because when I’m gone nobody else in my family is going to be interested in this pea. That’s why I sent you all some seed,” he said. “I didn’t want to fumble the ball — not on my generation.”

Cowpeas were — and remain — a staple of African American and Southern cuisine,

revered for their versatility, flavor, nutrition, and their ability to power through punishing conditions and produce over a long season.

They are also at the center of what culinary historian Michael W. Twitty calls “a transnational myth of resilience,” inextricably bound to the story of African enslavement on the American continent.

Generations of J.T.’s family had been saving and growing the clay pea since J.T.’s great-great grandfather, Louis Ross, bought 110 acres of land on the Louisiana-Texas

border in 1867, two years after news of the Emancipation Proclamation finally reached Texas. Louis earned a living as a farmer and a blacksmith, and unlike many of his contemporaries, he had learned how to read and write.

“We have no idea where Louis got those peas. But it was a common pea back in those days,” J.T. said. “The Ross side of the family was really the perpetuator of the seed. That’s because they were attached to the land.”

The original Ross place remains in family hands. Louis’ daughter, Clemmie, passed it down to J.T.’s grandmother, Daisy, a frugal woman who understood the importance of place and the value of freedom from debt. After Daisy’s death in 1981, his Aunt Maddie Harris and her siblings inherited the land, which J.T. eventually purchased.

After all, it was part of his story, too. J.T. had grown up on the farm, and he had internalized Daisy’s words: “Take care of the land, and the land will take care of you.”

After high school, he joined the Navy, where he served about two and a half years on the USS John F. Kennedy before being assigned to Quantico Marine Corps Base in Virginia.

In 1973, he returned home to Louisiana to help his Aunt Maddie and his mother, Lucile Taylor-Harris, on the farm. (J.T.’s father, Jay T. Sr., died in 1965.)

All the while, they kept Louis’ clay pea in cultivation.



J.T. holds a photo of his mother, Lucile.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF Cowpeas

The cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*) was domesticated in West Africa (and perhaps East Africa as well), before 2500 BCE, and by 400 BCE it had spread widely, to sub-Saharan Africa, the Mediterranean, India, and Southeast Asia.

It is not clear exactly when cowpeas arrived in the Americas, though Spanish colonists introduced some Mediterranean varieties to Mexico and the Southwest in the 16th or 17th centuries. Preserved seed leaves found during archeological work at a Creek Indian village in Georgia demonstrates that Native Americans were growing cowpeas as well.

There is also historical evidence of cowpea cultivation in Jamaica, in the West Indies, by 1687. (Hans Sloane, physician to the British governor of Jamaica, wrote of seeing them in his visit there in 1687-8.)

But the majority of *V. unguiculata* cultivars originated in West Africa and were carried on ships that also brought enslaved Africans to the Americas beginning in the mid-16th century, thus tying the tragic legacy of slavery to the story of the remarkable, resilient, and useful legume.

In a 2022 essay for the New York Botanical Garden, historical botanist Benjamin Torke wrote that “As a non-perishable, protein- and nutrient-rich food item widely available in West African ports during the slave trade, the dried seeds of cowpeas and other pulses (dried beans and peas) were a major portion of the scant provisions given to African people held captive under the horrific conditions of the ‘Middle Passage.’” Without them, he writes, the death rates among captives would have been much higher.

In the American South, where growing conditions resemble the hot, dry African climate, cowpeas grew prodigiously and widely. They were used as food for animals and humans (specifically enslaved Africans forced into work on plantations).

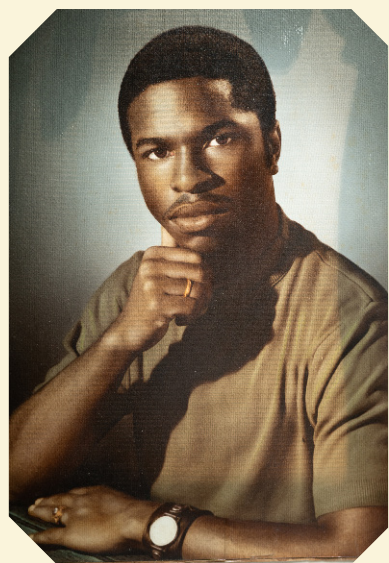
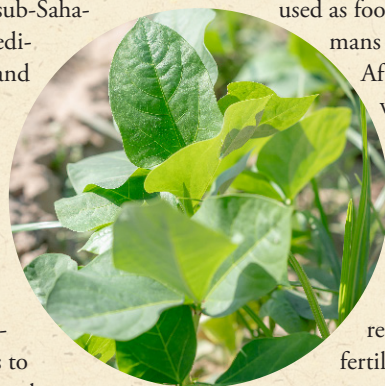
Cowpeas also worked their magic as soil enhancers. Like other legumes, *V. unguiculata* fixes nitrogen in the soil, reducing the need for fertilizer. Its roots also help to prevent erosion, and it is eminently useful as a cover crop.

Is there anything the mighty cowpea cannot do?

Cowpeas figure prominently in African culture, traditions, and foodways, which enslaved African laborers brought with them to the fields and plantations of the South. Some of these traditions have been adopted widely, often obscuring their origins.

At New Year’s, for example, in most southern grocery stores, you’ll find black-eyed peas displayed among bins of collard greens, often with packs of fatback tucked into them. This now-ubiquitous tradition originated with enslaved people, who brought with them the tradition of eating cowpeas, rice, and greens for luck and prosperity.

J.T. Harris noted another tradition involving the cowpea: At the beginning of a new year, he said, “ladies will place a single cowpea in their purses and men will place a single cowpea in their wallets as a ‘good luck charm.’” However, the real reason the tradition developed goes back to the former days of black enslavement. Parents would always tell their kids to keep a seed ‘for good luck’ but in reality, they wanted them to have a seed to plant in case they were suddenly on the run due to war, poverty, or some other peril.”



Three generations of protectors of the heirloom cowpea, top to bottom: Aunt Maddie Harris, Grandmother Daisy O’Gilvie Harris, J.T. as a young man.

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“I wanted to pass that seed on. To me, I think it’s tragic when you die and ... we bury our history. History shouldn’t be altogether buried with you.”

Take care of the land

Today, Rev. J.T. Harris and his wife, Regina, live on 26 acres near Carthage, TX.

For nearly 50 years, J.T. has been the pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Carthage, founded by former slaves in 1868. He was ordained in 1974 and received a Master of Religious Education (MRE) in 1980 from the Baptist Missionary Theological Seminary in Jacksonville, TX. In 2010, he received a Doctor of Divinity degree from the East Texas Bethel Baptist Association in recognition of his service to the church.

“I’ve been called to churches in bigger cities. I think to live in a city, I’d just wither and die. I gotta stay close to the earth, to the ground,” he said.

The heirloom clay pea, of course, always has a place in their garden. Beyond its value as a family heirloom, he admires

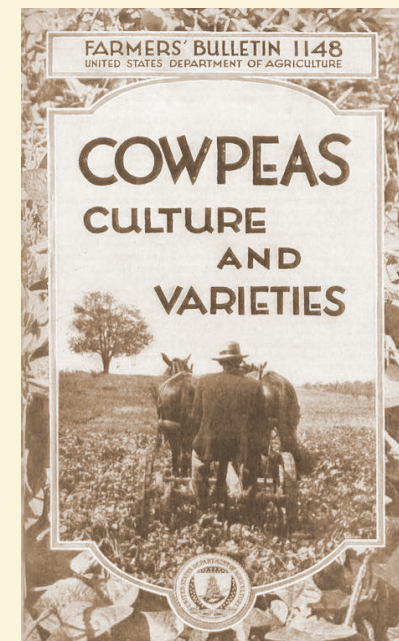
it for its exceptional growing habit.

“One year we had a big drought here,” he said. “When people would come by and see my garden, they’d say, ‘are you watering?’ I’d say no, and they’d say, ‘those peas are so green!’”

“They’re so drought resistant and bear up to frost,” he said. “In the days when there was no electricity and no deep freeze, it was good to be able to go out and pick a mess of fresh peas.”

“I wanted to pass that seed on. To me, I think it’s tragic when you die and ... we bury our history. History shouldn’t be altogether buried with you.”

We are so honored to offer this beautiful heirloom pea for the first time, thanks to the dedicated stewardship of J.T. Harris’ family over the generations. They have loved this variety for more than 150 years, and we think you will love it, too.



US Dept. of Agriculture pamphlet, 1920.

Below, left: Botanical drawing of an actual specimen collected by Hans Sloane during his visit to Jamaica in 1687–8. Below: Farmer plowing a field: Louis Ross (not pictured here) was among a cohort of emancipated slaves in Texas and Louisiana who bought land and began farming for themselves after 1865. Photo from the collection of the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory (TARL) at the University of Texas at Austin,



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The Louis Ross Legacy

In 1867,
two years after they were freed
Louis and Polly Ross bought a farm
and held on to their deed.

Eventually the farm fell to Clemmie Ross,
And then to her daughter Daisy,
From her son Jay T.,
the farm was passed to me.

To Louis that land meant independence,
for a man who would be free.
For his heirs it is an anchor,
a treasured family legacy.

Take care of the land, Granny said,
and the land will take care of you.
Avoid sorry folk of every race,
and make your visits few.

That farm was a source of pride,
for Granny in her time.
Tho born in 1887,
she mocked ole Jim Crow's kind.

She said, "I've plowed some mules, chopped some cotton,
I've worked hard in my life-time.
I've raked some yards, and made some beds;
but Son, they've been all mine."

Granny did not believe in luck,
she said your luck is in your hands.
Keep your mouth, and keep to yourself;
and hold on to this land.

If you make a dime, save a nickel,
put back for the rainy day.
Never, never get broke, my son,
no matter what the case,
Spend down so far, then go for broke,
but never give up this place.

Never live above your means,
that is an awful fault, then
You'll mortgage to the banker man;
and your deed will be in his vault.

If foreclosure comes, where can you go,
'cept on some other man?
So be frugal in your business;
and hold on to the land.

Granny Daisy was hard,
so many people thought.
Plant your seed on your land, she said,
for turnips don't grow on asphalt!

We STILL hear you, Granny!

—J.T. HARRIS
*Sermons in Verse:
An Offering of Poems
That Preach*

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NEW!

CLAY COWPEA #CW102 90 Days. Introducing a true Southern gem: J.T. Harris's heirloom clay peas! This African American variety was a staple in the kitchens of the south for generations, famed for their flavor and hardiness.—talk about a historical bite! We're thrilled to have unearthed this living treasure from the 1860s. These rare, earthy-colored peas were sourced from our buddy J.T. Harris in East Texas. Known for their resilience and incredible flavor, they've been passed down since 1867. Thanks to J.T., their legacy is still going strong. Enjoy a taste of tradition with these flavorful, time-tested peas! **Pkt (50 seeds) \$3.00**

COWPEA

A Southern Favorite, Easy to Grow!



(*Vigna unguiculata*) Very easy to grow, colorful, and tasty, cowpeas are popular in the southern U.S., Africa, and Asia. They originated in Africa and tolerate heat, drought, and humidity much better than common beans do. They are great picked young for use as green snap beans and stir fried, or boiled. The abundant leaves are not only edible, but incredibly delicious as cooked greens! They also make a great cover crop, sown in spring or summer and tilled into the soil when flowers begin to appear. Plant seeds about an inch deep after frosts have ceased and soil is warm. Most types "run," meaning they grow long vines, and so 3-5 feet should be allowed between rows. (50 seeds per packet)



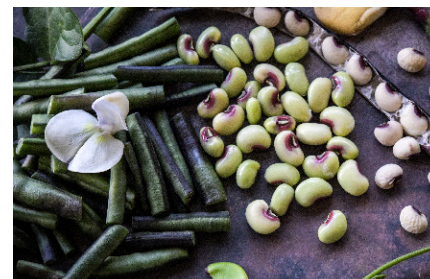
CALIFORNIA BLACKEYE PEA #CW108 70 days. An old standard variety with vigorous, high-yielding vines. Thomas Jefferson grew Blackeye peas in the 1770s. Originating in Africa, cowpeas are easy to grow and are very popular in the South. A very ancient crop. The vines also produce excellent "greens" for cooking! **Pkt (50 seeds) \$3.00**



BLUE GOOSE COWPEA #CW103 80 days. The peas are purple-gray, with 15 per pod. A rare old southern heirloom (pre-1860). Richly flavored seeds are a must in old southern recipes and the pods when picked young are quite delicious! Even the leaves are flavorful! Perfect when cooked like spinach, with just as much flavor. **Pkt (50 seeds) \$3.00**



HOLSTEIN COWPEA #CW101 80 days. Valued for their excellent nutritional content, including high protein and essential vitamins. Ideal for both fresh eating and cooking, Holstein cowpeas can be used in soups, stews, and salads, or dried for long-term storage. Named for the famous cattle breed. **Pkt (50 seeds) \$3.00**



PURPLE HULL PINKEYE COWPEA #CW109 A delectable, nutty-flavored cowpea perfectly suited to the screaming hot summer heat in the South. This classic southern cowpea has long been a favorite of our customers for its impressive heat tolerance and wild productivity. **Pkt (50 seeds) \$3.00**



OZARK RAZORBACK #CW148 90 Days. Very productive bush plants yield an abundance of beautiful mottled peas with delicious, creamy flavor! University of Arkansas Razorback colors are red and white, just like these popular peas. Our seed was sourced from the late Blane Bourgeois of Salem, Arkansas. **Pkt (50 seeds) \$3.00**



RED RIPPER COWPEA #CW106 (*Vigna unguiculata*) A rugged and reliable red-seeded cowpea to replenish your soils and fill your belly. This old Southern standby, which was also formerly known as the Tory pea, dates back to the 1850s. It was especially popular in Alabama and South Carolina. Farmers of yesteryear regarded it highly for the copious foliage or organic matter it produced, making it an exemplary soil-improving companion crop to corn. Since the early 1900s, a number of seed catalogs have lauded this variety for its drought and heat tolerance. A look back through antique American catalogs, especially those from companies in the Southeastern U.S., shows that Red Ripper was a must-have on the farm as a sustainable soil builder and delicious treat. This heirloom creates long, running vines, smothered in long 12-14 inch pods that are loaded with nutritious peas, up to 18 in a single shell! The flowers are a beautiful blue color and the immature pods make a perfect green bean substitute. In its native range in Africa, the cowpea has historically been grown alongside millet and sorghum as a nurse crop to improve soil. George Washington Carver also sang the praises of this almost-miraculous soil saver. The seeds for cowpeas were brought to the Americas by enslaved Africans, and over subsequent centuries this legume has revived ravaged soils and nourished many. **Pkt (50 seeds) \$3.00**