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## A REVOLUTIONARY VEGETABLE

By Sara Roahen ( /magazine/itemlist/user/984-sararoahen ) | March 9, 2015



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“Nya in the Garden,” by Preston Gannaway, from *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*

**N**ot long ago I asked a bookseller in New Orleans whether she carried Dr. Lance Hill’s book, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement*. “Is it for you?” she asked, jumping up from her seat. “Because you

should totally read it. Lance Hill is a badass.”

Lance Hill is a man who does not let quiet heroes be forgotten. Not the quiet heroes of the civil rights movement, of disaster recovery, or of the Thanksgiving table. Nor is he someone who lets villains win without a battle. Not the villain called white supremacy, not social passivity or root-knot nematodes. He lost most of his friends following Hurricane Katrina when he wouldn't shut up about what he believed were rampant injustices. And then he gained a whole new community of kindred spirits when he set out to save the Louisiana heirloom mirliton right when that lowly plant desperately needed a patron. A lumberjack of a figure with a poetic, Willie Nelson-like tenor to his voice, Lance Hill is most definitely a badass. An interdisciplinary one at that.

A Kansas native, Hill seems to have been born with an activist gene. His early biography includes composing anti-segregationist poetry as a preteen in the early Sixties, instigating a strike for higher pay at his first job in food service, being expelled from the University of Kansas for anti-war demonstrations, and serving a prison sentence on marijuana charges. He moved with his wife from Kansas to Hammond, Louisiana, in 1979, specifically to do anti-Klan work and to work as a labor organizer. They started a family and Hill made a living there as a shipyard welder. Eventually they moved to New Orleans. While continuing his activist work—against Klan activity, as well as the nuclear and apartheid movements—Hill earned his bachelor's degree and then his Ph.D. from Tulane University's history department. His dissertation topic was the Deacons for Defense and Justice, an armed self-defense organization that formed in Louisiana during the civil rights movement. In *The Deacons for Defense*, published in 2006, he argues that armed working-class African Americans were more effective at compelling the federal government to neutralize the Klan and uphold civil rights during the 1960s than was the more popular nonviolence position of civil rights leaders and middle-class African Americans. It's wholly convincing.

“Somewhere along the way the Deacons were forgotten—and for a reason,” he writes. “They simply did not fit into the myth of nonviolence. They stood as an embarrassing testimonial to the level of force that was necessary to bring African Americans into full citizenship.”

Hill is a hard-truth teller, an agitator, and a change maker. He's best known in some circles for directing the Louisiana Coalition Against Racism and Nazism, a group that outed David Duke as a Nazi sympathizer and former-but-not-reformed Klansman in the

1990s, when Duke was running for office in Louisiana, including for governor. LCARN, and therefore Hill, is largely credited for Duke's defeat.

Hill spends most of his days working as the executive director of the Southern Institute for Education and Research at Tulane, which he co-founded and where he studies and teaches tolerance education and race relations. His focus since Hurricane Katrina has been collective trauma and racial healing here and in other displaced communities. It's important to note that Hill walks the walk: he didn't evacuate prior to Katrina, and he lived through the storm in his Uptown home, which remained sturdy and dry enough to inhabit afterward. That's where he was five days later when he heard from his grandson, over the telephone, that thousands of people were suffering without food or water or medical care at the convention center just a few miles away. Hill drove to the scene, assessed the situation, and returned with supplies. He does not mince words when he describes the atrocities he witnessed there, and the atrocities that followed.

"Politically, after Katrina, I took up a very strong position against what I saw as an attempt to prevent African Americans—poor African Americans—from coming back to the city," he says. "I mean you'd have to be blind not to see that. I took a very high profile and public position on what I saw as a sort of indifference in the white community, on racism in healthcare and in education and in politics. And so I think I lost pretty much every friend I had in that process, not so much because of them but because I didn't see these as debatable intellectual topics. I saw this as a moral obligation and people who didn't take a stand as failing a moral test."

Losing friends wasn't such a big deal for Hill, who decided that a hermit's lifestyle suited him. Never having enjoyed the theater of social life anyway, he abandoned such conventions as lunches out, coffee dates, dinner parties, weddings, and birthdays. (He continued attending funerals, as ignoring those would just be too rude.) He might have lost some friends, but he still believed in community, and he had plenty of community-building ways to fill his time. The mirliton was one of them.

**T**he mirliton is a vining perennial that, along with melons and cucumbers, belongs to the gourd family Cucurbitaceae. Botanists refer to the vegetable, which has a single centermost seed, as a fruit. The mirliton is better known by the name "chayote" in this country, outside of Louisiana and other pockets of the South.

Christophene, vegetable pear, custard marrow, one-seeded cucumber, cho-cho, chouchoute, sayote, mango squash, and *Sechium edule* (its botanical name) are additional aliases. Louisianans pronounce “mirliton” in a number of ways, from phonetic to a French-leaning “MEL-a-tawn.” Hill believes that the first mirliton to grow in Louisiana probably arrived with the several thousand people who fled Haiti after the Saint-Domingue Revolution between 1804 and 1806. Haiti is the only other place where the vegetable is called a “mirliton.”

The mirlitons sold in United States supermarkets have been imported from places like Costa Rica and Mexico, where they are bred for uniform green color and smooth texture and grow to about the size of a large pear. The heirloom varieties that grow more successfully in places of low elevation and hard sun like Louisiana tend to be larger, lighter in color, furrowed, more oblong, and sometimes spiny. In other words, significantly uglier than the smooth, green supermarket specimens. Locals didn’t know anything but their ugly heirlooms until about 1995, which is when Hill says that the imports debuted in Louisiana.

While Louisiana heirloom mirlitons are more robust in flavor than their imported brethren, all mirlitons have a subtle dewy taste similar to a summer squash. Hill calls the mirliton’s most prominent flavor quality “crystalline.” A mirliton’s texture varies depending on the variety, but in general it snaps when raw, like a jicama or kohlrabi, and gives good crunch to slaws and salads. It gets soft and waterlogged quickly when cooked, and its muted flavors pair well with rich ingredients like cream and cheese. Mirlitons are also good for candying and baking. Hill makes a mirliton pie, which he describes as being like banana bread. His kids used to request it as their birthday cake.

Once established and supported by a chain-link fence, trellis system, or other such structure (even a tree), a mirliton vine can reach up to fifty feet and produce several hundred fruit in a single harvest period. The mirlitons must be consumed or prepared and frozen within about thirty days of harvest or they will send out shoots and begin to shrivel. Suffice it to say that there could never be too many recipe options or enough freezer space during good harvest years. Hill found a recipe for mirliton wine, a Jamaican tradition, in a journal called *China Brewing* and at one point was in talks with a vintner offering to make forty gallons of it.

The most iconic preparation of the vegetable in Louisiana is stuffed mirliton, for which you parboil or steam the mirlitons whole, halve them, and scoop out their flesh, keeping the skins intact. Then you mash the mirliton meat and mix it with breadcrumbs, the holy

trinity of seasoning vegetables (onion, celery, green bell pepper), lots of butter, often cayenne or hot sauce, and some combination of ham, shrimp, crabmeat, and ground beef. You mound that stuffing back into the hollowed-out mirliton shells and cook them like twice-baked potatoes. Mirlitons are primarily harvested in the late autumn in Louisiana, and this preparation—expensive and time-consuming—is a traditional Thanksgiving dish here. The *New York Times* even included an item on mirlitons by Kim Severson in a Thanksgiving feature entitled “The United States of Thanksgiving.” “Mirlitons are the perfect expression of Louisiana,” Severson told me. “They’re just charming little things. They’re watery and troublesome and a little bit bland. They’re hard to love in a way. But like with so many foods, Louisiana cooks take these gnarly things and make them delicious. Just like they do with boudin sausage, or big old weird chunks of pork, or even roux—which is nearly burned fat and flour. It all sounds crazy but turns out delicious.” Many Louisiana cooks, in the interest of preserving tradition but saving prep time, skip the hollowing out and bake the stuffing in a casserole dish instead. It’s then called mirliton dressing or mirliton casserole.

The mirliton itself is such a subtle backdrop some people don’t even notice it, and it would certainly be possible to eat one’s way through the restaurants of Louisiana and never encounter one. Mirlitons, like jambalaya and crawfish bisque and ya-ka-mein, are much more often cooked at home than in restaurant kitchens, and they make frequent appearances in cookbooks. A survey of my own Louisiana cookbook library, which includes roughly seventy volumes ranging from *The Picayune’s Creole Cook Book* (a reprint of the 1901 version) to *Cajun Men Cook* (1997) to *Cooking Up a Storm* (2008), revealed mirliton recipes in forty-one of them—and several contained more than one. When I make stuffed mirliton, I use the recipe in *Austin Leslie’s Creole Soul*, written by the late chef who didn’t survive his Katrina evacuation to Atlanta.

**T**he mirliton appealed to Lance Hill’s community organizer sensibilities from the first time he received some as a gift from a Louisiana neighbor. “I often make the argument that mirlitons bring out the best in people because of their abundance,” he says. “It used to be that there was a mirliton vine on every block—maybe two or three—and when the mirlitons came in, your neighbor, who hadn’t spoken a word to you for the last year, would show up at your front door with a Schwegmann’s grocery bag full. And so mirlitons are a vegetable that builds the bonds of civility and

community, in contrast to pecans. Pecan trees make you hate your neighbors because they're out there at four o'clock in the morning stealing your pecans that are hanging over the public side of the street. Or their kids are throwing rocks and sticks and trying to knock them out of the trees. Scarcity breeds atomization of the community, and abundance brings people together."

Hill had his own backyard mirliton vine for many years, until a hard freeze—likely aided by the microscopic, root-eating worms called root-knot nematodes—took it out in 1995. Over the next decade he followed the popular advice of local horticulturalists and backyard growers that to grow a mirliton all you have to do is buy a mirliton at the grocery store and plant it. The mirliton is itself a seed, so this should work. Still, his efforts failed again and again to yield a vine. Then, around 2007, Hill decided he would no longer take no from a plant. He set about researching how to grow a mirliton once and for all and became what he calls a "citizen scientist." In so doing he learned that he was not alone in his struggle—that, in fact, there were virtually no Louisiana heirloom mirlitons growing in and around New Orleans.

Hill's interest in the mirliton ramped up during the post-Katrina era when New Orleans was rebounding but everything about its culture still seemed fragile, jeopardized, and in dire need of a life insurance policy. In part because his reflex is to fight for the underdog, in part because he can't back away from an intellectual challenge, and in part because he simply missed them, Hill made reviving the Louisiana heirloom mirliton—what he calls the traditional land race—his mission. So monumental was the task, and so headlong did he plunge, that it's difficult to imagine how he also held down his all-consuming paying gig at the Institute.

After a couple years of research and trial and error in the dirt, Hill learned that, besides the obvious abuses and neglect the plants suffered during and immediately after Katrina, several significant factors had contributed to the Louisiana heirloom mirliton's demise. First, imports. Ever since imported mirlitons had entered the market, locals had grown accustomed to year-round access to what was once a strictly seasonal vegetable. The supermarket mirlitons were inexpensive, leaving little incentive to grow one's own. Then, even when someone did try to grow his own, if he used a supermarket mirliton as his seed, which even professional agricultural agencies advised, the chances of success were slim. The imported mirlitons were adapted to vastly different growing conditions. "As I tell people, if they buy one of these imported mirlitons from the local grocery store and plant it, they might as well be trying to grow corn by planting a can of corn in their backyard," Hill says.

The second contributing factor to mirliton extinction was bees. Honeybees are the mirliton's primary pollinators, and what honeybees New Orleans hadn't lost to colony collapse syndrome vanished because there was no vegetation after Katrina, says Hill. Another strike against the bees is that one of their preferred living spaces—attics—disappeared once people returned after the storm and re-roofed their homes. My own termite exterminator fielded so many calls about removing beehives from attics under construction after Katrina that he became a beehive specialist and a beekeeper on the side. While bees have been making a comeback, Hill says that hand-pollinating mirlitons is the best means of ensuring propagation.

The third main impediment to the mirliton's endurance in New Orleans was the environment. The soil isn't rich enough for unaided mirliton growth in much of the area, but locals who learned to tend mirlitons from their parents and grandparents are sometimes slow to recognize this. They saw the older generation achieve success with what nature provided. But what they often don't realize, says Hill, is that their parents or grandparents lived on an alluvial ridge or along the river, where there were natural deposits of well-drained organic soil. The ground in lower lying areas of the city and suburbs, where many families moved, tends to be merely compacted alluvial clay covered with sand. Besides that, every backyard used to have a chain-link fence and a fig or pecan tree. The former provided a built-in trellis, while the latter acted as a natural sponge when wet ground threatened to damage the mirliton vine's sensitive roots. But wood fences are the fashion these days, and newer homes don't generally come with full-grown fig and pecan trees. Growers whose yards don't already contain these natural mirliton-growing aids must troubleshoot—by building a support system and providing drainage opportunities, perhaps through raised beds or the fabric container system that Hill endorses. Plant diseases like anthracnose, as well as changes in weather patterns, contributed additional impediments to successful mirliton harvests.

Finally, and perhaps most compellingly, is what Hill calls “a break of cultural knowledge.” Growing tips and techniques are not being passed down through the generations like they used to be. Katrina exacerbated this break by making it so difficult for the oldest generation of New Orleanians to return to the city, if they survived their evacuations at all.

“I set out simply to bring back your grandma's mirliton,” Hill says. “I just wanted the vegetable you could plant in the backyard and not have to spray with fungicides and pesticides and not do much with and that would grow. And what I found out is that actually didn't exist anymore for our region.”

Or, it *almost* didn't exist. Among the resources that Hill scoured during the height of his mirliton research were old *Market Bulletins* published by the Department of Agriculture. In one of them he found an ad from an heirloom mirliton grower in Pumpkin Center, Louisiana, about 150 miles from New Orleans. After a visit to Pumpkin Center revealed that the grower's vines were still alive and well, Hill embarked on a driving tour around the state in search of other original land race mirliton farmers with ample vines (forty to fifty) from which he could pluck seed fruit for re-populating the New Orleans area. He soon formalized this re-seeding project, calling it Adopt-A-Mirliton and writing a fifty-page growing guide for adoptive growers to follow.

Hill ultimately discovered at least six Louisiana heirloom mirliton growers and identified more than nine distinct varieties. The median age of these growers, he jokes, was about seventy-eight. One of them, Ishreal Thibodeaux of Opelousas, whom Hill found growing a rare white mirliton, died last summer. The Ishreal Thibodeaux mirliton survives in the New Orleans area thanks to the seed mirlitons Thibodeaux offered up for adoption from his vines. Thibodeaux's obituary cited his namesake mirliton as one of his life's accomplishments.

I first sat down to talk with Hill about his quest to save the mirliton in 2011, by which time he was already known locally as The Mirliton Man. The project had hit its stride, and his passion was in full bloom. It was forty minutes before I got to ask the first question I had prepared, and our conversation lasted four hours, brought to a close only because my phone was flashing with texts from the babysitter and my car had two parking tickets. Hill might self-report as severely antisocial, but when talking about the mirliton he's unstoppable, emotional about the vegetable itself, and sentimental about the people who grow it. He named the heirloom mirliton varieties he found after their respective growers. Others include the Ed Landry mirliton, the James Boutte mirliton, the Joseph Boudreaux mirliton, the Papa Sylvest mirliton, and the Mister Rock mirliton. He doesn't divulge Mr. Rock's last name because Mr. Rock lives so close to New Orleans that he might be barraged by mirliton seed-seekers if his full name got out.

At the time of our 2011 interview Hill had several hundred names on a waiting list for seed mirlitons, and he was working with urban micro-farmers to help produce specimens for adoption. Hill described his kindred spirits in the mirliton revival as "older



people looking to connect with the past, and young people who want to be part of the past and know that the mirliton is iconic.” Heirloom mirlitons were not for eating at that point. Every last one needed to be used for seed in order to preserve Louisiana’s original land race.

**T**hanks to Hill’s efforts, today the Louisiana heirloom mirliton is no longer extinct in the New Orleans area. A large paper bag delivered to my porch one Sunday in November from Hollygrove Market & Farm contained a single, pale green, deeply furrowed, spiny mirliton. I tossed slices of it into a salad.

As the associate director of market-

umbrella.org, Emery Van Hook works closely with vendors at four weekly Crescent City farmers markets in New Orleans. She credits Hill with what she observed as a noble mirliton turnout in 2014. “I saw more this year than I have since Katrina,” she says. “A lot is dependent on weather, but from the looks of the market it seems that the crops are replenishing themselves. I think Lance gave the mirliton tremendous visibility. He gave folks something to act on.”

Randy Stephens of the Bywater Neighborhood Association, which has staged a Mirliton Festival for twenty-five years, says that Hill’s booth, from which he dispenses growing information and a limited quantity of mirlitons, is a festival favorite. “I have people call me and try to get in early to buy mirlitons from Dr. Hill. I have to tell them, ‘Nope. The booth opens at 11 a.m. You have to be there to get them,’” he says.

One of the young growers whom Hill mentored early on is Nat Turner, director of the Lower Ninth Ward’s Our School at Blair Grocery (OSBG), a sustainable urban vegetable farm with educational, food justice, and youth empowerment missions. Thanks to seed mirlitons and Hill’s guidance, the gardens at OSBG did contain forty-to-fifty-foot vines covering an overhead trellis for a while. “All the old people around here were super happy to have mirlitons back in the neighborhood,” he says. “When they saw those big fat leaves, they would all stop and look and tell mirliton stories. It was a spectacle.” Sadly, the vines at OSBG didn’t survive Hurricane Isaac’s prolonged winds. Turner is determined to try again, this time with a sturdier trellis system that he will cement into the ground.

It struck me while talking to Turner that he and Hill are both food justice protagonists, though I've never heard Hill, a protagonist of justice in every sense, use such a new-school term. I asked Turner whether Hill's day job in racial healing and reconciliation ever came into play when they were collaborating on mirliton revival. "Of course," he said. "It came up between us because we'd like to do an event where we bring teenagers together from different ethnic communities in New Orleans—Latino, Vietnamese, African-American, Caucasian, Cajun—to taste each other's way of eating mirliton as a means of coming to a better understanding of other people's food heritage and contributions. I still want to do that."

Hill himself sees his mirliton and race relations work as separate but connected. On the one hand, studying plants is a salve. "As a political activist and as a historian, there's not much in life that is very encouraging. And there's not much that's predictable in human nature, and that which is predictable is not very encouraging," he says. "But with science, you can control some things."

On the other hand, Hill's seed-saving work is undeniably an extension of his activist proclivities. The fervor in his voice intensifies when he recalls a particularly exciting discovery: "I found a Haitian postage stamp of a mirliton, a beautiful stamp with a beautiful mirliton that looks like what we would call our traditional Louisiana heirloom mirliton: very long, oversized pear shape, deeply furrowed, spiny. Along with the mirliton is a picture of Dessalines, the revolutionary of the Haitian Revolution." He laughs to himself and then continues, "Which tells me that it was a revolutionary vegetable in some people's eyes."

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