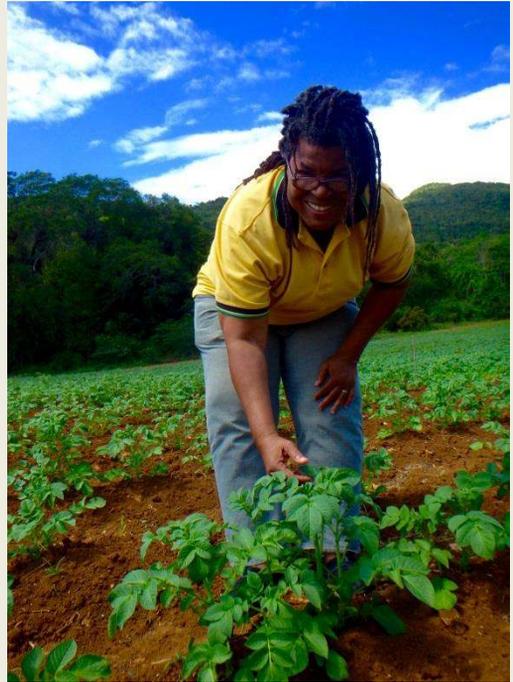


Opal Slater...From city dweller to Irish potato producer

Until three years ago, Opal Slater was a definitive city dweller. Today, she is one month away from reaping her first crop of Irish potato, and has fallen in love with farming.

Opal was born in Kingston, and spent her entire life in the city. A born entrepreneur and problem solver, at a young age Opal found a true calling in food processing: *“I had to cook on Sundays, and that allowed me to experiment with food, fruits, and flavors”*. Trying new things and continually looking for opportunities along the way, Opal dove into food processing in the mid 2000’s, opening a jerk-smoked fish processing business. Business was great - until the Global Recession of 2008 hit. After losing her factory and her business, Opal felt a change was needed, and sought divine intervention: *“God told me to go to Magotty, to the country. So that’s what I did”*. Having never lived out of the city, life in rural St. Elizabeth was a true game changer. Ever resilient and always up for a challenge, Opal took to the country like she never expected, *“I’m a country girl at heart!”* Opal quickly became involved with the community and started attending farmers meetings at the St. Elizabeth Cooperative Credit Union, an agriculture-friendly financial institution partnering with local producers.



Opal Slater, St. Elizabeth Irish Potato Producer

Opal’s first foray into agricultural production was growing callaloo, a labor-intensive crop that proved too difficult to maintain. But where there is failure there is learning, and Opal credits her experience with callaloo as setting the stage for her current Irish Potato crop. Building linkages with the fertilizer provider Newport-Fersan and the seed distributor HL Agro during her callaloo days eased the road that was to come.

Opal’s next big project began in August 2016, when she attended a women’s focus group at the St. Elizabeth Cooperative Credit Union that was facilitated by PROPEL. The purpose of the focus group was for female producers of St. Elizabeth to share their experiences in agriculture, and to connect the group to the PROPEL project. Participating in the women’s focus group that day inspired something more for Opal, as she was introduced to the idea of Irish potato production, a crop she had not yet considered. Discussing Irish cultivation with the PROPEL team led to further independent research, market research, speaking with her new networks in the agriculture sector, and ultimately, a light-bulb moment for Opal. Inspired and armed with the information she needed, Opal set forth, seriously looking for land where she could cultivate Irish potato for the first time.

“I was asking around about land that was available, and I heard about the Cowan family, who had land but they were not renting it out. So I went and knocked on their door!”

Having secured the land, Opal returned to the St. Elizabeth Cooperative Credit Union to obtain an agricultural loan to get her off her feet and into the production of almost 2 acres of Irish Potato, in prime land between Magotty and Lacovia. She also connected with Kemoy Edwards, the Agricultural Extension Facilitator for the PROPEL project, whom she states was instrumental in helping her secure a contract with MidCo, a buyer of Irish potatoes who guaranteed Opal they would take everything she produced for a set price. Having looked at market prices and armed with knowledge obtained through word-of-mouth, Opal did not originally like the price given. Together with Kemoy, the two of them managed to negotiate with MidCo, whom she eventually signed on with for a price higher than originally offered.

After obtaining a soil test from Newport-Fersan, Opal purchased most of her seeds from H&L Agro, and also received some seeds from the National Potato Program. Inspired by a presentation on H2K climate-smart technologies, Opal also invested in bio-pesticides to both protect her crop and renew her soil. Opal planted her first rows of Irish potato the day after Christmas, 2016.



Opal inspecting her crop, prayers for rain

Unfortunately, drought hit almost immediately, and disaster may have been imminent. But Opal had faith:

“The only thing in farming that you are sure of is your belief in God... Farming has strengthening my faith in God. I see it as a miracle. You plant the seed, but you have to care for it, you tend it, and you enhance the miracle.”

Without a drop of rain for a month, that faith was tested. Opal’s resilience paid off. Rain came, and by the end of January her crop was not only sprouting, it was thriving.

Opal states, “*Kemoy has been integral*” to her current success, while the supportive partnerships she has built with her input providers, her buyer, and her credit union have all led her to where she is today, one month from reaping her first crop of Irish potatoes.

When asked about her future business plans, Opal has it all thought out:

“I want to be a big farmer and make lots of money. Farming is one step in the whole scheme of things, I want to add value to whatever I am producing - but the drawback is that I don’t have the collateral to move it forward. So the business plan is to start simply, build resources and credit worthiness with the new institutions, so that further down the line I have more opportunity to grow.”

Opal has her eyes on a plot of 10 acres near her home in Magotty, and is hoping to put in 5 acres of Irish and 5 acres of sweet potato this summer: ***“I’m always looking at the next step for more growth. Moving from micro farm to small farm to large farm.”***

Regularly employing between three and five workers on any given day, with Irish potatoes, Opal has found a crop that both works for her and brings the joy and self-sufficiency she deems as crucial in life. ***“I believe it is a way women can make themselves more independent in terms of the possibility of financial gains. And it can be sustained! What we need to do as a sector in Jamaica is to move agriculture beyond subsistence farming to larger scale farming. Instead of everyone doing small scale, we need to boost productivity and the acreage that is farmed. Many farmers, especially women have under an acre, but you want to move half of them to higher acreage and that is how you can bring prosperity.”***



A proud Opal Slater showing off her farm in St. Elizabeth

How can other women do what Opal has done, and in such a short amount of time? Knowledge and relationships are key! *“Read everything you can, attend every meeting you can, and use your connections with RADA and with input providers to expand. If we can get more women involved in farming, they can take care of their families and improve their own independence.”*