

## Olive Johnson believes farmers should diversify to manage risk and gain success

Olive Johnson has been a power producer in central Jamaica for over 30 years. A farmer at heart, Olive works side by side with her husband to ensure their 12 acres and greenhouse consistently thrive and provide not only for their family, but for the future.

Starting as a very small farmer, Olive has always looked to diversify to whatever line of agri-business would suit her best, expanding from small crops to cattle, broilers, mixed crops, and now, greenhouse vegetables. Currently, Olive and her husband’s main crops are Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, carrots, and yam, while the greenhouse is producing sweet peppers and tomatoes. And she wouldn’t trade it for anything. When asked what she loves about farming, Olive responded:



Business Owner & Producer, Olive Johnson

*“The independence that it allows me, I don’t think I would change it for anything else. It was my life saver when nobody would employ me when I left school and didn’t have any work experience. I started farming straight out of high school, and at the time, I would have said ‘No I wouldn’t turn out to be a farmer’. But as they say, that necessity is the mother of invention. And then along the way, you realize what farming can do for you, how it has saved your life over the years, in every respect it has been the challenge, the satisfaction at the end of the day.”*

Olive owes much of her success to her sharp business acumen, which has taken the Johnsons from small farmers to major players in the agriculture sector. Always looking for the best prices from either farmgate, higglers, or through contracts with Glastonbury or Mid Island Processing and Packaging Co (MIPPCO), Olive knows that the business relationships she has formed over the years are essential, though she never puts all of her eggs into one basket. Using a diversification marketing strategy, Olive

never plans to sell entire yields to one sole buyer, and always ensures she has a safety net in case of drought or crop disease. By allocating parts of her acreage to fixed term contracts with major buyers, while raising other crops to be sold locally, through higglers, or in her own restaurant, **Olive ensures she has invested enough in different venues to ensure a profit.**

Olive recounts how she had never worked with Glastonbury or MIPPCO before connecting with PROPEL, but **as a businesswoman, she sees the importance**



Produce from the Johnson Farm can end up for sale in Coronation Market

**in her relationships with the private sector and the importance in local producers building loyal relationships with formal buyers.**

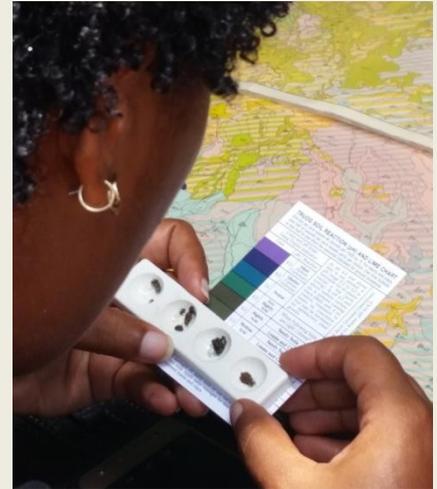
Another important aspect of Olive’s success has been her involvement outside of her own business, sitting on the board of the Rural agricultural Development Authority (RADA), as well as in establishing and acting as current president of the Mile Gully Production Marketing Organization (PMO) Crop Society. Not only does collaborating on a higher level with RADA ensure Olive’s voice is heard and her community is represented, **working with other producers in her area creates a collective spirit and is essential for information sharing among the local agri-sector:**

*"I network within the farming community, call people for prices. Some persons are private, but there is a lot of word of mouth through our internal networks about the farming business. Often the private prices are to the moment and work better, but you better learn how to negotiate!"*

While Olive's powers of negotiation have been crucial, so has her willingness to try new things and branch out beyond the traditional farming culture. **Having attended a PROPEL farmer field schools on Irish potato production in 2015 and 2016, Olive has changed her practices and is leaning towards a more sustainable and organic way of production.** Using bio-pesticides and water harvesting, as well as safe and healthy crop management practices such as proper field hygiene practices, protective clothing and gear, and waste disposal, Olive prides herself on learning new practices.

Seeing how organic and climate smart procedures can work better for producers in the long run, especially in the face of mounting climate uncertainty, **Olive believes that food production does not have to be a gamble.** Soil testing through PROPEL and RADA has increased Olive's knowledge of her own land, as she recounts that soil testing *"helped me know what is best for the land. I did a soil test for a plot of land and found out the land was just empty and would not work without so many chemicals to correct it"*. Through planning, research, information sharing, and hard work, Olive and her husband show the rewards that production in Jamaica can bring by taking the guess work out of farming.

Today, Olive is moving into the next phase of feeding her community, running a roadside cook shop that is already a booming business. Opening the cook shop in early 2017 was an insurance policy given the unpredictability of the current weather patterns and the volatility



Soil testing a critical component of Olive's better farm management practices



Olive prepares and sells cooked food directly from her land

in the Jamaican agriculture market. Olive says she enjoys using the products that her farms have produced in her menu items, from mixed vegetables to red peas, and chicken, among many others ingredients:

*"I know what I'm growing, I know exactly what I'm eating and serving. At the restaurant, I can have far wider margins, and customers know that my product at the cook shop is grown and reared well. I think that is a plus for me. I have always been into food production so people know what to expect when I am cooking."*



Olive at the cook shop

Olive's main advice to other women who are considering a future in agriculture: *"Go for it! I don't know, but it gives you certain satisfaction that what you eat is what you are growing. I could never be comfortable going and buying everything I need. No matter what the cost, work towards your independence. If hard work isn't going to kill me it isn't going to kill anybody. I have worked really hard. You should see me in the field, those men out there, they're scared of me!"*