



seeds of  
culture

STORIES AND KNOWLEDGE

FROM THE GROUND





WHAT STORIES AND KNOWLEDGE MAKE UP THE  
AGRICULTURAL HISTORY OF SÃO PAULO?

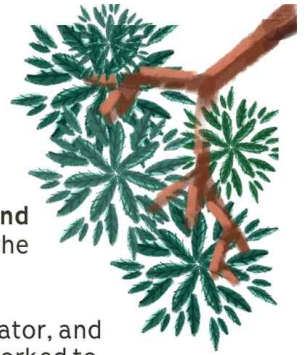
# presentation



In the INSUAH project (Integrated Study on Urban Agriculture as Heritage), international researchers explore the heritage of urban agriculture in five cities: Bandung (Indonesia), Havana (Cuba), Nuremberg (Germany), São Paulo (Brazil), and Tokyo (Japan). In each city, the team identifies cultural practices and traditional knowledge related to urban agriculture. As part of the Brazilian team, we believe that the life stories of those who cultivate food demonstrate how these practices have resisted labor exploitation and environ degradation. Sharing these stories is a way to fight forgetfulness, and this booklet serves precisely that purpose. We are mapping strengths and threats to urban agriculture, to advocate for policies that protect this valuable activity. This booklet seeks to honor eight small farmers from São Paulo's southern region, an area with a long agricultural history that remains largely overlooked by the broader population. Therefore, we present their voices, in their own words allowing each farmer to share their experiences and insights on how to secure urban agriculture in the city.

Parelheiros, the main district in São Paulo's southern zone, is known for its protected areas rich in Atlantic Forest remnants and vital watersheds. It has historically been a hub for family-based farming, shaped by a diverse mix of cultural backgrounds, including Indigenous communities, Japanese descendants, and migrants from Brazil's hinterlands. Today, most plots range from 0.5 to 5 hectares, and nearly half are organic or natural. This small-scale agriculture is the backbone of the region's cultural and ecological identity. Despite its importance, Parelheiros faces challenges such as illegal deforestation, social inequality, and the undervaluation of family-based agriculture. These issues are often reflected in low incomes for farmers and threaten the continuation of traditional practices. It is precisely because of these challenges, combined with the rich cultural diversity of the farmers, that we have chosen to focus on this group and region. The stories in this booklet highlight the resilience and dedication to farming and offer insights into the needed strategies to preserve agriculture in a rapidly urbanizing environment. They reflect a deep, intergenerational connection to the land, as well as the innovative approaches of newcomers and returnees who are renewing and adapting traditional techniques. By amplifying their voices, we aim to honor their efforts and shed light on their invaluable contributions to São Paulo's agricultural history.

# seeds of culture



**Seeds of Culture: Stories and Knowledge from the Ground** was inspired by the experiences of eight farmers from the far South of Sao Paulo:

- **Jerá Guarani** is an Indigenous Guarani farmer, educator, and leader from the village Kalipety. For 20 years, she has worked to recover traditional Guarani crops and seeds, restoring not only food but also connection to land and culture.
- **Tomí** was born on the island of Bororé, a Parelheiros' neighborhood. 15 years ago, she joined the organic transition movement, earned a scholarship to study biodynamic agriculture, and became one of the founders of Cooperapas, the São Paulo's organic Farmers cooperative.
- **Juarez**, originally from Ceará, a northeastern Brazilian State, has been transforming the spaces he rents for over ten years. He is passionate about hosting groups and sharing his agricultural journey with them.
- **Mauri**, born in Cipó, a Parelheiros' neighborhood, joined the organic movement 15 years ago. He received a scholarship for biodynamic agriculture training and co-founded Cooperapas –the Agroecological Cooperative of Rural Producers and Clean Water in Sao Paulo's Southern Region.
- **Massue**, born in Quintana in São Paulo's interior, has been farming in Chácara Santo Amaro, a Parelheiros' neighborhood, for 53 years, transitioned to organic farming, and maintains Japanese food crops.
- **Zé Mineiro e Maria** are a farming couple from Ladainha in Minas Gerais, a southeastern Brazilian State. They have farmed in Cipó, a Parelheiros' neighborhood, for over 20 years, participated in the organic movement, and co-founded Cooperapas. Together, they produce artisanal cachaça, the sugar cane Brazilian spirit.
- **Toninho**, a farmer and fisherman born in Curiúva, Paraná, a southern Brazilian State. His family has been farming in Chácara Santo Amaro for more than 30 years. Since 2021, he has focused on growing organic crops.

We hope this journey through the stories and deep-rooted knowledge of the land and on the ground will invite readers to connect with and appreciate urban and rural farmers!

---

# JERÁ GUARANI

Jerá had no personal contact with the non-Indigenous culture until she was 11. She even could not speak Portuguese, the official Brazilian language. In the mid 1980 her village, in southern region of São Paulo, people still lived off subsistence agriculture, although they did not have any traditional Guarani seeds anymore. Jerá knew traditional Guarani food only through the stories shared by her elders. In the 2000's, at the age 20, she began her mission to regain the seeds and seedlings her people's traditional food by visiting other Guarani Villages around the country and beyond.

For Jerá, preserving traditional food is essential to keeping her culture alive. Through this food, the Guarani receive both physical and spiritual health. Preserving this heritage means cultivating the land, protecting the forest, and conserving cultural rituals. Thus, traditional Guarani food also symbolize the strong connection between the community and the land. Today, Jera's village, Kalipety, has recovered more than 50 varieties of sweet potatoes and nine varieties of corn, alongside cassava, peanuts, pumpkin, watermelon, yams, and an assortment of native fruits.





*“When you’re plowing, preparing the land, or planting, concentrate with true faith. Ask for the blessings of Nhanderu Nhamandu, Nhanderu Tupã Mirim, Nhanderu Jakaira, and Nhanderu Jekupe’i [Guarani deities], and ask for the Nhanderu kuery [the entity that embodies all deities] who cheer the spirits of the children up, and the children. Ask for their blessing, so that the children are born well in Nhanderu’s grace.*”

*This is our practice when we plant, this is our tradition: we ask for blessings and express our gratitude. We also bless the maize with the sacred smoke of the pipe. I ask for spiritual strength, even though I know very little; I have great faith. And with this faith, I ask Nhanderu Tupã Mirim to bless what we will plant the next day.”*

# TOMI

Tomi is a farmer who practices biodynamic agriculture, a holistic approach that emphasizes the interconnectivity between soil, plants, and the cosmos. She feels a deep and special affection with seeds. In her planting routine, she honors the life and growth of each plant she cultivates:

*“A vegetable doesn't care if there is purchase order or not; it just grows and grows. If you don't pick it, you lose it... I think it's even disrespectful to these little plants. People may find it funny - imagine respecting a plant! But that's how I feel, you know?*

*Because the plant has produced; it's right there, growing for us. It's there for us to harvest, to enjoy. And if it goes to waste, if it just goes to seed, then I feel upset. I really feel that way. I create something beautiful and then it's lost in the garden. I don't think it's fair - even to the plants themselves.”*

In Tomi's family, it is a tradition to plant a tree for each newborn child. To her, each seed represents not only the life of a plant, but also the lives of loved ones.

---



"EACH SEED IS A LIFE!"

# JUAREZ

Although his father and grandparents were farmers, Juarez could only dedicate himself to agriculture after retiring. He actively pursued formal education in sustainable farming techniques, like the organic and agroecological methods. Besides structured learning, he also picked up practical insights from his friends and neighbors. Importantly, he did not just apply these new techniques directly but modified them according to his own preferences and farming style. Juarez prefers minimal tillage, using a hoe sparingly and improving soil fertility with his homemade compost, soil covers, and fertilizer recipes. He cares for both the soil and the animals:

*“There’s a problem here with some guans [a type of native bird, *Penelope obscura*] eating my kale. I see a few nibbled leaves, but they never used to bother me like this. They’re eating it now, but it’s part of nature!*

*Should I kill the guans just because they’re eating my kale? Isn’t the land theirs, too? I tell people who come here, “I’m working for myself and for nature. I’m working for myself and for the animals.”*



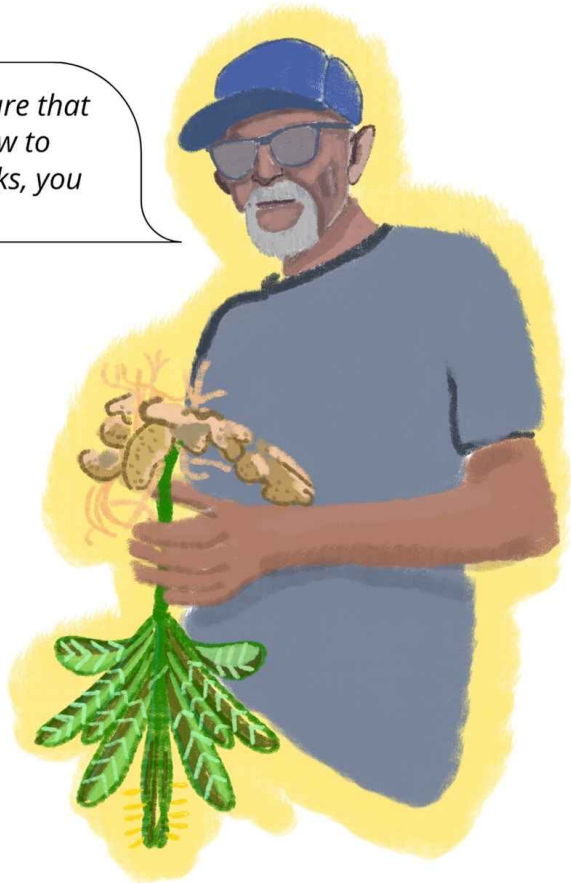


## Juarez's Seedling Compost Recipe:

"I work with what I call mudão [literally big seedling, and actually a very fertilized garden substrate]. I make this mixture here and add it directly to the bed, so there's no need to fertilize afterward! The compost includes castor bean cake, bone meal, phosphate, limestone, chicken manure, cow manure, and goat manure."



*"It's a crazy mixture that only I know how to make! And it works, you know?"*





# MAURI



Mauri began working in agriculture with his grandparents at a young age, but a severe agricultural crisis forced him to take a job in downtown São Paulo. Despite succeeding in his new role, he was unhappy and wanted to return to the land, following the traditional methods his grandparents once used. He began farming again with nothing more than a can of coriander seeds. During the 2000s, Mauri took on an important role in promoting organic farming in the Parelheiros region. This led him to participate, together with other farmers, in founding the first and only organic farmers' cooperative in the city, called Cooperapas. He takes great pride in this accomplishment, by saying: "No one can take away this legacy of ours!" Currently, Mauri continues to work the land, growing a variety of vegetables and legumes on a 2.5 hectares plot, and he does so with the help of his family members. His preference for family-based agriculture is rooted in his experiences as a wage earner; he finds managing employees challenging:

*"My [family-based] system works [because I understand the impact of exploitation from my own experience], because of that [my system works]! Since I was exploited [for so long], I [still carry the felling with me], you know? By bosses, right? Because I accepted it, too, right? I didn't know any other way—I had to work, and that's how it was.*

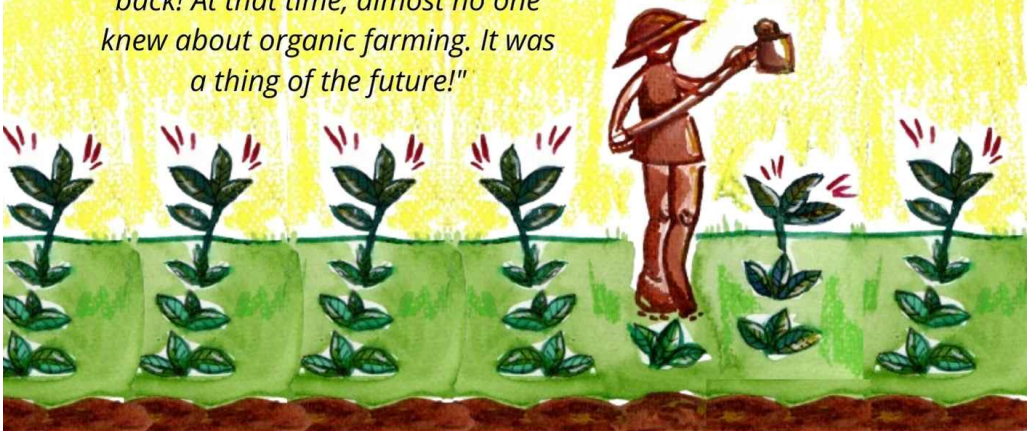
*When you share profits and expenses equally... You get motivated; there's no need to keep telling people to work. Everyone is an owner! Everyone knows their role and tries to do their best. So, I prefer it this way. We cover our expenses, and then we share the leftover profit."*

# MASSUE

Massue is considered the oldest and one of the first organic farmers in the city. Before her marriage, Massue worked on her family's chicken farm, practicing subsistence farming. After marrying, she moved to her husband's family farm, in Chácara Santo Amaro, a neighborhood Parelheiros', where she has lived and worked for more than 50 years. She witnessed a time when agriculture was thriving there, though it involved relentless physical labor: every day, her family carried heavy sacks to load two trucks with cabbage destined for Ceasa, the municipal wholesale supply center market, or Cooperativa Mauá, a retail cooperative.

In 2007, a project from the University of São Paulo (USP) encouraged Massue to switch from conventional farming to organic farming methods. At the beginning, Massue sold all her organic produce to the Church of World Messianity (a new Japanese religion). This church supported her in continuing organic farming, even though it was difficult for her to stop using pesticides, which she was used to. For Massue, who relied solely on her farm income, the transition had to be gradual, converting her land piece by piece. She reflects on the process:

*"There's no secret to organic farming - it's all about improving the soil. If you improve the soil, the plants will thank you and give you back! At that time, almost no one knew about organic farming. It was a thing of the future!"*



Massue grows crops tied to Japanese–Brazilian cuisine, such as purple shiso (a common Japanese herb) and edamame (young soybeans), which demonstrates her focus on preserving traditional ingredients that are valued in her community’s food culture. Ready to try her recipe?

Recipe for Green Shiso (*Perilla frutescens*) Seed Sauce:

*"The seeds shouldn't be too ripe; They need to still have flowers on the stalk. Wash the stalks thoroughly, then remove the flowers and seeds from the stems. Place a handful of seeds in a bowl, sprinkle with salt and rub them with your hands until a brown liquid comes out. Rinse well. Boil salted water and use a sieve to briefly submerge the shiso (10-15 seconds). Immediately plunge the shiso into cold water to stop the cooking. Soak the shiso for 30-60 minutes, then strain and squeeze out any excess water."*



# ZÉ MINEIRO E MARIA

Zé migrated to São Paulo with his father at the age of 14, “hitching a ride” with the Japanese–Brazilian farmer who regularly traveled to their town offering work on his farm. Zé Mineiro began working on Japanese–Brazilian farms, where he “just grew up”. He was trained as a farmer mainly there, in Parelheiros. Maria joined him after they married. The couple has a strong connection with the land and as farmers:

*“I dedicated myself to the land! My wife and I dedicated ourselves to the land. We gave all our time to the land!”*

*“It’s because, since I was little, I’ve always been working on the farm, right? I’m used to dealing with the land, so that’s it! But hey, there’s no way to escape agriculture. I’m a farmer! I’m the son of a farmer!”*





*"Pesticides are the villain of people's health. So, since they're a villain, let's change? Let's try? Not everyone has accepted it and still doesn't accept it, switching from conventional to organic, right? To be able to make money. So, [they asked me] who would accept exchanging conventional for organic? Oh, I'm willing because I want to live longer!"*

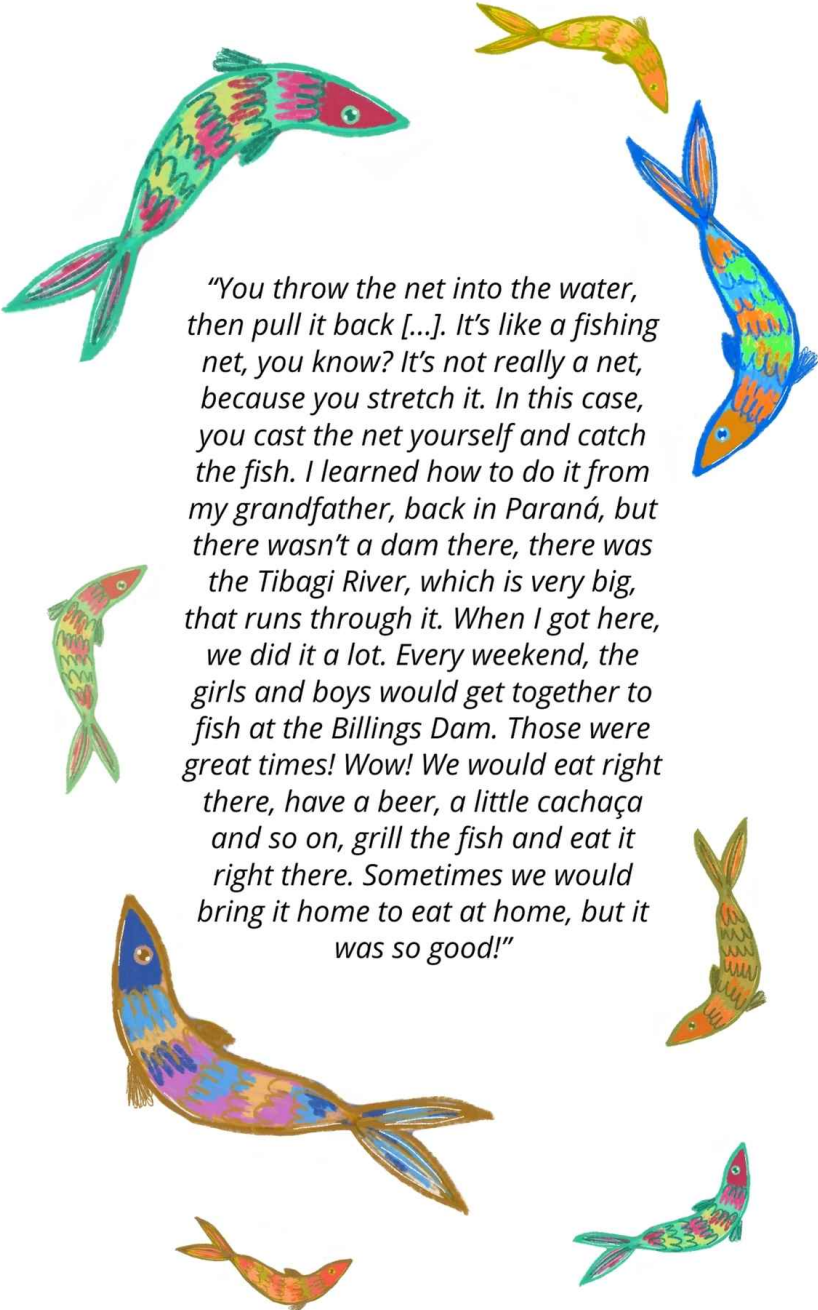
# TONINHO

Toninho lived in the countryside in Paraná (a State in southern Brazil) until he was 20, growing coffee and other crops to support his family:

*“Back in the day, when I was born, I grew up raising pigs and chickens. I planted coffee, beans, corn, and rice. So, we got everything from the fields! We killed the pigs and got the lard. We didn’t cook with oil, used lard instead. Yeah... we pounded the corn to make corn flour and planted cassava to make cassava flour– that’s just how we did it.”*

Raised by a cattle-dealer grandfather, an Indigenous grandmother, and farmer parents, Toninho maintained his childhood lifestyle even after moving to São Paulo and working in the city center. Every weekend he would go fishing at the Billings Reservoir casting his net. Looking back, he remembers it with joy. “You’d just cast the net twice and have enough to eat. There were so many fish!” he recalls.





*"You throw the net into the water, then pull it back [...]. It's like a fishing net, you know? It's not really a net, because you stretch it. In this case, you cast the net yourself and catch the fish. I learned how to do it from my grandfather, back in Paran, but there wasn't a dam there, there was the Tibagi River, which is very big, that runs through it. When I got here, we did it a lot. Every weekend, the girls and boys would get together to fish at the Billings Dam. Those were great times! Wow! We would eat right there, have a beer, a little cachaa and so on, grill the fish and eat it right there. Sometimes we would bring it home to eat at home, but it was so good!"*



# acknowledgments

The stories and knowledge gathered here offer a glimpse into the richness and wonder we experienced in the company of these esteemed farmers. Without their generosity and openness, this fanzine would not exist. We thank them for their trust and reaffirm the importance of initiatives like this, which honor and strengthen the lives, work, memories, knowledge, and expertise of the men and women who persevere as farmers within the city. Our deepest gratitude goes to Jerá, Tomi, Massue, Mauri, Zé Mineiro, Maria, Juarez, and Toninho.

This research and much of the zine's production were made possible through funding from the INSUAH project by the Volkswagen Foundation, to whom we extend our sincere thanks. Our access to and contact with the farmers were facilitated by the Agroecological Fund (FUA), which also provided financial support for the publication and continues to assist the farmers in remaining in the area.

We are grateful to everyone who envisioned, coordinated, and carried out each step to bring this booklet to life: Kimberly Marques, Nart, Zerlô, Tania Knapp, Izabela Borba, Anita Valente, Katharina Christenn, Juliana Mangaba, Renato Cymbalista, Luciana Itikawa, Andréia Cristina da Silva, Jéssica Groke, Teresa Siewerdt, and Manu Dalbertas.

Our thanks also go to the Bauhinia's team, who generously hosted a gathering at Zé Mineiro and Maria's farm, allowing the artists to connect directly with the true authors of this publication.

# technical sheet

“Seeds of Culture: Stories and Knowledge from the Ground” was developed as part of the Integrated Study on Urban Agriculture as Heritage Project – INSUAH, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

Institutional Coordination: Prof. Dr. Renato Cymbalista      General Coordination: Dr. Luciana Fukimoto Itikawa

Administrative Support:  
Fundação de Apoio à Universidade de São Paulo (FUSP)

Institutional stakeholder: Fundo Agroecológico (FUA)  
Territorial articulation cooperation articulação territorial:  
Ms. Anita Valente da Costa and Ms. Izabela Alves Borba

Booklet Workgroup:  
Organization, editor, and research – Ms. Tania Knapp da Silva  
Workgroup coordination and booklet layout – Kimberly Marques  
Illustration artists – Nart and Zerlo  
Translation English version – Ms. Tania Knapp da Silva  
Review – Ms. Anita Valente and Ms. Katharina Christenn (English Version)  
Booklet Design: Workgroup

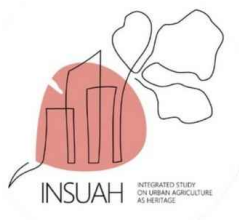
Farmers:  
Antonio de Camargo Mendes  
Jerá Guarani  
José Geraldo Batista Santiago  
Juarez Sales  
Maria dos Anjos Pinheiro Santiago  
Maria José Kunikawa  
Massue Shirazawa  
Mauri Joaquim da Silva

Excerpt from an interview with Jera Guarani taken from the work Substrato Guarani by Teresa Siewerdt, available at:  
<https://www.praticasinsurgentesligadasaterra.com/substrato-guarani>

Excerpt from the interview with Zé Mineiro and Maria taken from the video documentary Festival Culture and Education on the Banks of Grajaú by the Imagem collective, available at:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXY09EDlAfU&t=7381s>

Printing (Brazilian Version)  
Tacatinta Mini Gráfica

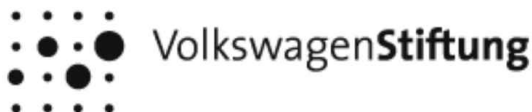
## PRODUCTION



FUA | fundo agroecológico



## FUNDING



confluentes

IBIRAPITANGA



## EXECUTIVE PRODUCTION

 @oquecabnomeuprato

 @nartarte

 @zerlo\_

 @tania\_knapp







"Seeds of Culture" are living stories woven into the southern rural-urban fringe of São Paulo. On small farms, families cultivate the land with love and dedication, defying threats like illegal deforestation and social challenges. Their hands, which sow dreams, practice an agriculture that withstands time and the pressures of the modern world, preserving both biodiversity and ancestral knowledge. Each story, gathered through conversations and workshops, reveals the cultural richness and resilience of these guardians of the land, each persevering in their own way to ensure a healthy and sustainable future for Brazil's largest city.

