

234: Healing Through Gardening (with Leah Lee-Burnett)



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Jen Riday

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You're listening to the Vibrant Happy Women podcast, episode number 234. We're talking about gardening and self-care and a whole lot more. Stay tuned.

Hi, I'm Jen Riday. This podcast is for women who want to feel more vibrant, happy, aligned, and alive. You'll gain the emotional, physical, and spiritual tools you need to get your sparkle back and ensure that depression, anxiety, and struggle don't rule your life. Welcome to the Vibrant Happy Women Podcast.

Hey my friends, Jen here. I have a special guest for you today; her name is Leah Lee-Burnett. And I don't know when I started to follow her but I just noticed there was a woman online commenting on some of my posts. And she said something intriguing, so I went and followed her and then I saw she had a garden. And I was like, "Well, that's an interesting garden."

And then I saw she was doing yoga and a painting class and I'm like, "This woman is so cool." So I followed her on Instagram and I saw that Leah is making a huge difference in St. Louis, in an urban area where not a lot of women do gardening. And she is not only doing gardening but she's teaching women to take a deep breath, and get their hands dirty, and learn how to garden themselves. And in the process, learning how to take care of themselves and engage in higher quality self-care, it's very, very beautiful.

And beyond that I just want to say that Leah is a special soul. When I see pictures of her and see what she's doing I can feel her energy all the way up here in Madison, Wisconsin, she's in St. Louis. I can feel that she's doing something important and something special. So when I thought about self-care and who I wanted to reach out to, to discuss this I thought Leah right away, Leah, she's doing something that's making a difference.

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So I want you to listen to this with an open heart, even if you're not a gardener, listen with the idea of how could you not only take better care of yourself, perhaps with the soil and with community, with other women. But how can you use your special gifts, and talents, and passions to help other women to heal, and to take care of themselves, and to just live a happier life? We all have a way we can do this and Leah is doing it her way, listening to her special calling through that intuitive voice, it feels right to her.

So as you listen, keep that tucked in the back of your mind, what is your way to make a difference? Well, let's go ahead and jump in.

Jen: Hey, everyone, I'm with Leah Lee-Burnett today and she is the founder of Growing Food Growing People, a non-profit that empowers people to grow food and reconnect to the soil. A social justice advocate at heart, Leah believes food justice is absolutely social justice. Leah lives in St. Louis, Missouri with her mom and her two kids. Welcome, Leah, I'm so happy you're here.

Leah: Thank you for having me.

Jen: So you guys, I met Leah through social media. And I started to watch her and see this beautiful woman who had a garden and then she had other women coming to do yoga and painting in the garden. I'm like, whoa, what is this? And so I started to look closer. And Leah, I want you to kind of introduce how we connected online and how you started Growing Food Growing People, which intrigued me so much.

Leah: Well, we connected online like you said, through my post. But I don't know if you know, I've been following you for quite some time now. I was going through a really bad divorce and somehow I stumbled across Vibrant

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Happy Women's podcast and it was absolutely amazing. So, again, thank you for having me.

I love everything about the space that I've created in our backyard. It has become a magical sanctuary for women to just come and reconnect with the soil. We definitely practice yoga, meditation, we learn about where our food comes from, how they can take what I've done in my backyard and incorporate it into their lives. So we definitely talk a lot about sustainable living as well, so it has turned into just a piece of heaven for us back there.

Jen: And so do you live in a pretty urban area of St. Louis?

Leah: I do.

Jen: So not a lot of gardens around except yours, for the most part?

Leah: Correct.

Jen: So when women come to your yard to experience this, what are their first impressions?

Leah: Their first impression is they cannot believe all of this is growing in someone's backyard in the city. They are really impressed because it looks like a little mini farm in the back, there's food growing everywhere. They feel a connection as soon as they come, they enter the gates. They have all told me they feel a connection as soon as they walk in.

Jen: That is so cool. Well, so how did you get the idea to start doing this or when did you start gardening and then expand it like this?

Leah: I've been gardening for the last three years. It's become a passion of mine and I was gardening at my previous job. And when Covid hit we were

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all forced to stay at home. And so I wasn't able to get to the garden and I just decided to do it in my backyard.

Jen: I know you have a lot of containers that are really interesting, I saw a picture of you painted some cinder blocks. I thought that was so clever. Explain some of the containers you're using for your garden, I think it's cool.

Leah: Yeah. So like I said before, Jen, I wanted to make sure that this was sustainable. I wanted people to come into my space and look around and say, "I can do this at home." So I did, I started with containers, pots from Family Dollar or the Dollar Tree, totes, anything that I could drill a hole in the bottom of and allow drainage for my plants, I was putting food in them. So I am literally growing in everything in my backyard. But then we do have some raised beds that are very, very easy to make. We went to Lowe's and bought a few two by fours, and like you mentioned the cinder blocks.

And for under \$20 we were able to make a raised bed to start growing food in as well. So for people that – for the women that were coming to the backyard, if they did have a lot of space, we talked about growing food out of a raised bed. But if you lived in an apartment, or if you are living in a transitional home and you don't have a balcony, but you do have a front porch, we talked about growing food out of containers on your front porch.

Jen: That's awesome. So do a lot of the women who come to your yard, go and start their own gardens?

Leah: Absolutely, they have, and I think it's been one of the sweetest spots for me, just receiving text messages, and messages through social media of the ladies and children that have come to the space and they're now growing food at their own home.

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Jen: Yeah, it's like a ripple effect, yeah.

Leah: Yeah, it's very, very sweet.

Jen: So did you grow up gardening and learn this love from your mom, by chance, or did you just pick it up on your own?

Leah: I did not grow up gardening, and I did not pick it up on my own. My dad passed five years ago and when I went to clean out his apartment it was full of plants.

Jen: Wow, fun.

Leah: So I cannot just let them die, so I took them to my apartment. And at the time my neighbor was growing food on her patio, and introduced me to container growing. And that year I started – and that was 2000 – that was a couple of years ago, four or five years ago. That particular year I started growing food on my patio for the very first time. And then I've just fallen in love with it ever since, and that's been my life.

Jen: Wow. And then you just kept expanding from the patio to the yard? What are your favorite plants that you're growing right now?

Leah: My favorite right now is okra, and it's only because I love the flower that the okra plant produces. I do not eat okra, I give that away, but the flower is beautiful.

Jen: What does it look like? I've never seen it.

Leah: It's an off white color and the inside is a really dark purple, and it's beautiful. I will have to take a picture and send it to you, it's beautiful.

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Jen: Yeah, we'll put it on our show notes page, that sounds like a great idea.

Leah: Absolutely.

Jen: Yeah. So you're in an urban area and a lot of people, I don't want to go right to stereotypes, but a lot of people talk about urban food deserts. And I want to hear your thoughts on, is that a true stereotype? And how do you view that idea of there not being enough fresh food in urban areas?

Leah: There's definitely not enough fresh food in urban areas. I used to refer to it as a food desert until a really, really good friend of mine explained to me that there's nothing natural about the environment, that people are wanting to call a food desert in urban communities. There's nothing natural about this.

So we've been actually referring to it as food apartheid. Because people are literally being kept from healthy food, which is a huge disparity for the community that I live in, which is why I love doing what I'm doing and why it's a must that I continue the work that I'm doing. Because otherwise there's not enough people actively doing work to promote policy change to where this isn't an issue anymore.

Jen: So food apartheid. That is a really cool term. Explain more what you mean by that.

Leah: So again, a food desert, when we think about a desert, that is a natural occurrence. That's something that happens naturally, the habitants of the desert; they naturally know how to adapt. It's their way of life. And apartheid is, it's a system of discrimination, particularly around race. And the actual definition is a policy or system of segregation or discrimination on grounds of race. And if you look at most urban communities across the

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United States they all mimic one another. They all have inadequate access to healthy food.

And healthy food is what sustains us, it's what gets us up in the morning, it's what gets our body going, we all need healthy food. So it's an apartheid, it's not a desert, there's nothing natural about the circumstances that myself and my neighbors are living in, which again is why I am dedicated to growing healthy food and people.

Jen: Yes, I love that. So these neighborhoods with the systemic segregation and oppression, what's the real cause of that, can you kind of walk us through why it's different than other neighborhoods, the stores that are there versus not there for example?

Leah: Because those neighborhoods are full of people of color. This is again part of systemic racism. It's been like this for generations, this isn't new. It isn't new that people of color face huge large disparities. What's new is people are recording what's going on and recording and drawing attention to the fact that maybe this community is suffering because of the lack of resources that they have. Or maybe this community is suffering because all they have to eat is Flaming Hot Cheetos and Pepsis and Coca Colas that are in the corner markets.

Jen: Yeah. So a big grocery store wouldn't want to come to that neighborhood because of this systemic segregation?

Leah: Absolutely.

Jen: What kinds of stores would you find typically?

Leah: You'll find pay day loans, you'll find liquor stores. You'll find corner stores, your corner mom and pop stores where everything is processed.

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You'll find Dollar Trees, Family Dollars, Dollar General. Again they're all selling processed food, food that isn't good for us, food that isn't going to promote making healthy decisions and healthy choices. It's food which you buy for right now. We're worth more than food that just gets us by for right now. We need sustainable food.

Jen: Yes, which is what you're growing and teaching others to grow, I think it's amazing, it's amazing.

Leah: Thank you.

Jen: Well, Leah, I would love to hear your thoughts on the Black Lives Matter movement and what your experience of that has been?

Leah: Well, I am extremely unapologetic when it comes to my Black life and Black lives mattering. And I'm sure you've seen that on my social media pages. I really don't know how to respond. I've been asked a couple of times here lately, what my stance was on Black lives mattering. And I have two children who are Black, and again, I am a Black woman, so to ask me why my life matter, it's not a hard question to answer. But it's one of those questions where you wonder why it's even being asked. Why is that even a topic? Why do I have to defend the fact that Black lives matter?

Jen: So who's asking you that question?

Leah: I've gotten a lot of responses in my inbox on social media because again, I am unapologetic about it. So when it comes to Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, I'm very – I don't have a problem with voicing how I feel about those situations. So I've had a lot of people come into my inbox and ask me questions like, "If you're a Christian how can you just stand on Black Lives Matter, all lives matter." It's a huge slap in the face to me.

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This is what I did, Jen, I asked a lady that was in my inbox, she wanted to know why I couldn't post All Lives Matter but I loved posting Black Lives Matter and I asked her...

Jen: Wait, I'm going to interrupt you really quick. Was this woman white or Black or something else?

Leah: She's white.

Jen: White, okay, go ahead.

Leah: She's white.

Jen: It's important for the story.

Leah: Yeah. She's a white woman and I asked her, "Would you want to be a Black woman for a day?"

Jen: What did she say?

Leah: And the silence that you and I have just experienced these couple of seconds was the same silence that her and I experienced. And she said, "Leah, that wasn't the question. Why isn't it that all lives matter?" "Would you want to be a Black woman for a day?" So, without going back and forth, without pulling up numbers, and every Black woman or every Black man that has been killed by the police, or every Black woman or Black man that faces injustice every day, just going to the bank or going to the grocery store, or going on a camping trip with their other white friends.

Instead of going through all of that, you can kind of silence the misunderstanding by asking a white person who's questioning why Black

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lives matter, why we should take a stance on that. You can ask them the question, “Would you want to be a person of color for a day?”

Jen: Right, exactly. And we had the Me Too movement a while back and was predominantly women, some men, but predominantly women saying me too. And I noticed a lot of men felt villainized during that time, they didn’t understand it. But that movement was okay.

And I think Black Lives Matter is an acknowledgement that this is a group that has suffered significantly more than many of the other lives on our planet. So it’s saying, “Hey, we see you, we recognize the pain you’ve experienced.” We acknowledge that your experience is different, it’s okay to say, “Black lives matter.” It doesn’t mean the other lives don’t matter. So tell us some of your personal experiences of being oppressed or discriminated against, Leah.

Leah: One experience that really disgusts me, but it was an experience and I’m sure it happens quite often. I was working for a corporate organization and my manager at the time was an older white man. And he felt the need to tell me that his family used to own slaves. And even when they gave them the opportunity to leave they didn’t want to leave, because their family was so good to them. And so this was a couple of years ago.

And when I think of slavery, I don’t care how good you thought you were to this family, I think of – my mind automatically goes to just rape and the annihilation of an entire group of people, and just disgust. And he just thought that that was a good conversation to have. He would also come by my desk and beat on my desk like an African drum, like he was beating on an African drum.

Jen: That’s so weird. What in the world. Oh my gosh.

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Leah: This is the world that we're living in right now.

Jen: Right. And people often don't recognize that they have these biases and lenses and really it all results in dehumanizing certain groups of people. And I like to compare, you know, sometimes I think that white people can't understand what it means to be discriminated against or to be oppressed. And sometimes I feel it's effective to use the word 'abuse' instead of oppression and discrimination.

Because I think everyone listening can understand what might happen to a person if they have been abused. We know they maybe lose some confidence. They start to question their own sanity. When they come out of an abusive situation they might be angry as they learn to get their voice. And then they have to learn how to set boundaries.

And I have friends who say, "The Black Lives Matter movement, it's so angry." I'm like, "Yeah, but if you had been abused for 400 years, that anger is absolutely valid, it's part of getting your voice and standing up for yourselves." And we need to listen and respect, and help, just like we would someone who had left an abusive situation. So does that comparison resonate for you at all, Leah?

Leah: Yeah, it does, it does resonate for me. And I like that you use the word 'abuse' because it is abuse. And it's years and generations, so much time of abuse that hasn't been addressed. No one is being held accountable for the abuse.

And then the person or the group that have been abused they aren't even given an opportunity to heal, because it's continuing to happen. And it perpetuates itself through the media, through of course, social media, through interactions on the streets. So a horrible cycle that really needs to be addressed. And I think abuse is a very good word to use for it.

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Jen: You used that word ‘healing’, again to come back to comparisons maybe globally, maybe more white people could understand. If a child had been in an abusive situation, we understand they need therapy, they need healing, they need love, if a woman leaves an abusive situation, same thing. And so why can’t we as society recognize it is our job to help someone who has been abused for so many centuries, with help, and healing, and love, and a hand up, and all the things that you guys are asking for, which I’m so glad you are.

Leah: Yes.

Jen: Yeah. Tell me about your kids. I know that they go to a predominantly white school, is that right?

Leah: Yes, that is correct.

Jen: How has that been for them?

Leah: That has been – we’ve had a few challenges there, but my children are amazing. It’s so weird that we, that Black people have to teach their children how to act in situations where they are the minority. We have to teach our children, “Okay, so if a white cop pulls you over and you’re with your friends, you make sure you already have your ID available, don’t be in the back plan and goofing off. You pay attention, because your life depends on it.”

So with my children being in a predominantly white school, we have to have very intense conversations all the time. However, they have really good friends that have – stepping up to the plate and they are holding themselves, and even their parents and their friends accountable of how my children and other children of color feel. However, there’s still a conversation that Black parents have to have when their children are going

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to all white schools. And my children and I, we have those conversations quite often.

Jen: So just telling them to be careful, be good, be extra good.

Leah: Yeah, we can't do the same thing that Johnny does, because you're not Johnny, I know that's your friend, I know that you all think you are alike, but you're not. So be mindful of the decisions that you're making. And it's very sad that we have to have that conversation.

Jen: But for the most part you feel like there's a generational shift happening?

Leah: I do.

Jen: Tell me about that.

Leah: I do feel like there is a generational shift happening. The children that my children associate with are – they're kind of like no nonsense for discrimination and racist acts. They are not afraid to call their parents out, to call educators out, to call police officers out. They're not afraid to do that at all. So I do think that there is a generation of young children coming up who know what's right from wrong. And they know what feels right and what doesn't feel right, even though their parents could teach them one thing or society is showing them one thing.

They are going off of their feelings, off of how they feel and if they don't feel something is right, they're not going for it. And I applaud them for being fearless and stepping up to hold people accountable for just racist and disgusting acts, I really do applaud them.

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Jen: That's so great. I saw a social media video of a daughter calling out her dad with no shame, it was beautiful. And he didn't get upset at her but I think he resisted, like, "Who are you to tell me what to do?" It was so cool.

Leah: But I think those type of situations open up room for conversations. He didn't get mad at his daughter and after they stopped recording they had a serious conversation.

Jen: Right, right, exactly. And with the camera on he couldn't say a lot. He knew she had the camera on. Oh my goodness. Well, so back to your garden, we know that people of color, particularly Black people, they need to heal. They've just been oppressed and abused, using our earlier word. How is your garden helping women to heal and engaging more quality self-care in that way?

Leah: That is a very good question. For one, they are connecting with women that they wouldn't have connected with before. So because of Covid, everyone's been stuck in the house. So I don't have groups of friends coming. I have a woman from this area coming, a woman from this community coming. And so we are all coming together, again, some of these women would have never met otherwise and we are practicing yoga. So we are breathing together.

Do you know how many times people go throughout the day and maybe only take two or three really good productive deep breaths? They're just on auto-pilot just going, going, going. And for women we are – most of us are nurturers at heart. So we take on so much, we're just going, going, moving. So these ladies come to the garden, find them – as soon as they walk in the first thing I say is, "Find your spot." And they find them a spot anywhere in the garden, whether they want to sit amongst the colors, or sit by the okra, they lay out their mats and they just sit.

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And then we meditate together, again, we are practicing breathing. Breathing is so important, and we talk about why breathing is so important. How just taking a few deep breaths in the middle of the most chaotic storm you could ever be in, could be life changing, just a few deep breaths. And so we do that. And then we will get dirty. We will – whether it's starting some seedlings, or whether it is harvesting some green peppers or some herbs that are available in the garden, but we get dirty.

We interact with the soil because what I know for sure is there is healing in the soil and there is power in the soil. And afterwards those ladies leave so full and so rejuvenated and ready to grow, whether it is growing food on their porch or growing on the inside, whether they're like, I really do need to meditate. I do need to take a few deep breaths throughout the day. I've never done that before. So it's an experience, Jen, it is an experience and I love it so much. I'm so grateful that I was chosen for this.

Jen: Do you feel called to do what you're doing?

Leah: Yes.

Jen: So what does that feel like to know that it's a calling and not just a choice, if others are wondering if they have a calling, something similar?

Leah: It feels like – it makes my mouth water, [crosstalk]. It makes my cheeks burn from blushing so much just talking about it. It makes me want to get up and do it every single day, and I never think about a dollar amount that's attached to it. All I think about is getting dirty and trying something fresh out of the ground, hoping there's a tomato that's ready for me when I walk outside.

Jen: That's so cool. And if you're that passionate about it, everyone who comes to just see you and your garden will pick up on that, which is

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contagious, yeah. I love following your page, I'm nowhere near St. Louis, but I'm all about she's got Sungold tomatoes, sweet. Then I messaged you and said, "I just planted some Sungolds, they're not ready yet. But we were talking gardening across all these miles. I love it.

Well, Leah, if people want to learn more or follow you on social, where should they go?

Leah: On Instagram and Facebook I am at Growing Food Growing People. And I have a website now, it is gfgpstl.com.

Jen: Alright, we will put links in our show notes. Leah, this has been amazing. I feel so honored to know you. Everyone go follow her, her passion is just really touching and it makes you want to garden, which I did. Leah, do you know, your garden kind of inspired me to do mine. I forgot to tell you that. I did a garden [crosstalk].

Leah: That is so good.

Jen: Yeah, I have a garden. And I told her the other day what I was growing and she was legitimately happy for me, whereas other people just gloss over, their eyes get glassy.

Leah: I get so excited, so excited.

Jen: That's awesome. Well, you're doing good things in the world and thank you so much for sharing them with us today.

Leah: Well, thank you for having me, Jen.

Isn't that such a good story, what Leah's doing in the world? I love that she listened to what felt right to her in regards to, I did a Black Lives Matter, and

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not just all lives matter, in regards to how she has this garden that grew beyond her patio and started to take over her yard. And then it expanded so she could invite other women. With each step of what Leah's doing, she listened to her heart. She trusted herself.

And if you're not sure of the song you're meant to sing or the difference you're born to make, or the calling that you have in the world, listen to your heart. And how do we do that best? Quiet quality self-care where we can hear ourselves think. Are you getting a little bit of that every day? If not, take a step outside just like Leah and her friends did in the garden, take that deep breath, sit still and listen. Ask that question, what is my next best step? How can I serve? How can I make the world better? How can I add light?

That is a huge part of what Vibrant Happy Women is all about, each of you has a song you were meant to sing, a difference you were born to make. And I want you to create the space in your schedule, in your life, with your boundaries and find out what that is. Because when you start to sing that song, your heart will sing, you hear it when Leah talks about it. Gardening is her calling and bringing gardening and the joys of that kind of self-love and self-care to other women is her calling. And you can feel her passion. And you all have something similar to bring to this planet.

So take the time to find out what is, and if you want some help with that, in October in the Vibrant Happy Women Club we will be talking about identity. Who are you? What are your gifts and talents? What are you here to contribute? You can totally join us. It's going to be juicy and amazing. And that is at jenriday.com/join.

Well, my friends, go follow Leah, her passion is palpable, it will make you excited to be alive, I promise you. I love following her feed on Instagram

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and on Facebook. And maybe start your own garden as well. It's probably not too late, especially if you're in Australia.

Alright my friends, thank you so much for listening, make it a vibrant and happy week. Take care.

If you enjoy this podcast, you have to check out the Vibrant Happy Women Club. It's my monthly group coaching program where we take all this material to the next level and to get you the results that will blow your mind. Join me in the Vibrant Happy Women Club at jenriday.com/join.