

## Sugarcane is the foundation of efforts to preserve, revitalize Geechee culture on Sapelo Island

By Amy Carter

amy.carter@agr.georgia.gov

Sapelo Island was the epicenter of early experimentation with sugarcane as a commercial crop in Georgia. Lying just east of McIntosh County, the island was the home of an 18th century planter named Thomas Spalding, who experimented with olives, dates, arrowroot, cotton, oranges and sweet potatoes, as well as sugarcane.

According to research by David Shields, a food historian at the University of South Carolina, Spalding found little success until he imported from the Caribbean a cold-hardy cane called Purple Ribbon. Spalding erected a sugar refinery on the island – the tabby ruins of which still stand today – and established “Spalding Sugar” as a widely recognized brand.

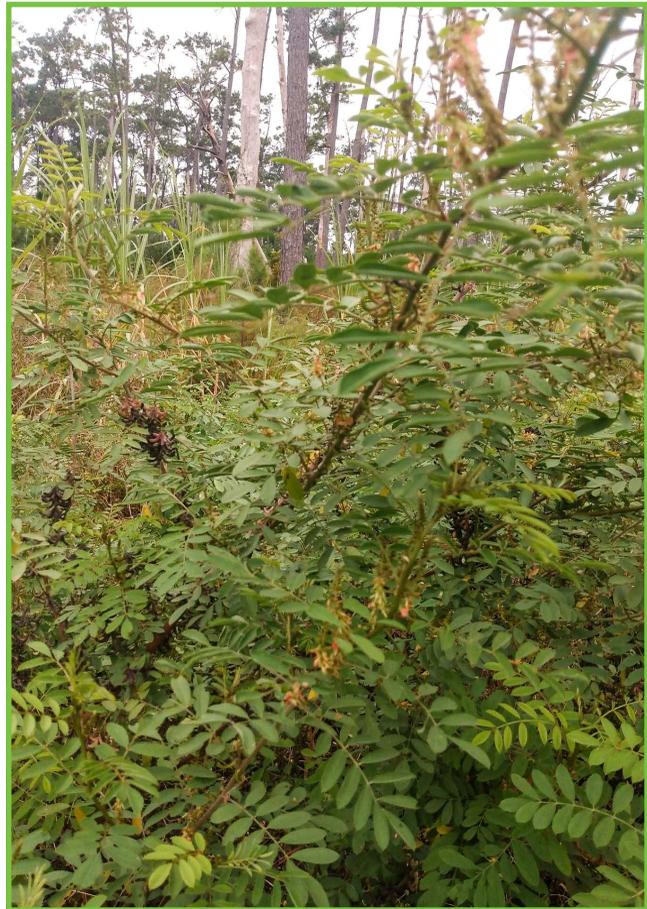
While his success with Purple Ribbon inspired its use by growers in Florida and Louisiana, Georgia’s commercial crop declined with time. However, cultivation continued on Sapelo as the freed slaves who once worked Spalding’s plantation handed down their knowledge of the crop from one generation to the next.

Today, sugarcane is experiencing a revival through the combined efforts of the Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society and the University of Georgia. SICARS is a nonprofit founded in the early 1990s to help preserve the culture of Hog Hammock (Hogg Hummock), the sole survivor of several communities established on the island by African American freedmen after the Civil War. The community has a current population of freedmen descendants that totals about 30.

The repatriation of Purple Ribbon cane on Sapelo began with Shields and researchers at Clemson University. It was thought that Purple Ribbon was extinct until Shields searched eBay and found a source for seed.

Like many other crops in Georgia, the Sapelo stand of Purple Ribbon was thought destroyed by Hurricane Irma. Other varieties were planted in its stead, but the original stand regenerated and will be used to propagate Purple Ribbon in greater numbers.

The reestablishment of crops such as sugarcane, red peas, garlic, indigo and sour oranges is designed to generate jobs and income to lure young people back to Sapelo and fund-



Indigo is grown on Sapelo Island to make dye. The dye will be sold under the Sapelo Island brand. (Courtesy Maurice Bailey)

ing to keep alive the Geechee-Gullah culture brought over by enslaved people from West Africa. A sister site in Townsend on the mainland, Georgia Coastal Gourmet Farms, is also producing heirloom crops for SICARS.

“It’s all for SICARS, so we hope that we are bringing recognition back to the community, being that we have the last African American community on Sapelo that is also supposed to be the last Geechee community established in Georgia,” said Maurice Bailey, whose late mother, Cornelia, was a founder of SICARS and noted Geechee author and historian.

“We don’t have a lot of people left on the island. This is a way of letting people know that we’re still here and get help for causes we’re fighting for on Sapelo by producing things on Sapelo and shipping them to other places to get our recognition.”

Like most young people born and raised on Sapelo, Bailey, 51, lit out for other places when he was old enough to leave the island. Now he’s back and hoping he can create job opportunities for others to return as well.

“I keep getting drawn back here. No matter where I go, I feel this pull to come back,” Bailey said. “People remind me that this was my calling to help the island and help the heritage stay alive. I don’t know if that’s a curse or a calling, but I’m back here again trying to do what I can to try and save a community.”

Bailey said they’ve already got several retail outlets set to sell the 300-odd jars of cane syrup they hope to produce this year. The plan is to clear more land for future plantings, but labor and machinery are issues.

Dr. Nik Heynen, a geography professor at UGA, is working with Bailey to reestablish the crops, and brought students prior to the COVID-19 pandemic to help with planting, harvesting and maintenance. With harvest upon them, the pair is working to recruit locals and mainlanders willing to work hard and make the trek to the island.

Sapelo is only accessible by plane or ferry, and housing is an issue since the island – save about 300 acres belonging to Geechee descendants in Hog Hammock – is owned by the state. There is no commercial lodging.

Even with those hurdles cleared, harvesting sugarcane on Sapelo is a tough sell because it involves “backs, legs and arms,” Heynen said. He and Bailey got creative one year “rigging up some weed whackers with saw blades, sort of Mad Max meets sugarcane,” but mostly they’re using clipper, machetes and brute force.

Heynen was recruited to help SICARS by Meryll Alber, director of the UGA Marine Institute on Sapelo. UGA established a research station on Sapelo in 1952.

With an interest in social and environmental intersections on topics such as food, Heynen said he’s committed to helping SICARS reestablish commercial crops and generate profits that can be put back into the operation to buy better equipment, recruit permanent labor and preserve the Geechee culture.

“This is a rest-of-our-lives kind of endeavor,” he said. “Maurice and I are in it for the long haul.”

For Bailey, who grew up pulling weeds by hand and watering crops with buckets of water toted from the well, it’s a chance to ensure the lives and traditions of his ancestors aren’t forgotten by history.

“I hope this goes to creating some jobs for people and also bringing recognition back to the Hog Hammock com-



Sapelo Island is one of 14 major barrier islands off the Georgia coast. It is only accessible by plane or boat. A state-run ferry makes daily round trips between the mainland and the island. (Coastal GIS Lab, UGA)

munity. As our numbers shrink we are being taken over by outsiders and our voices are becoming less. With these products, our voices will be heard again, recognized, and with more support, we won’t be forgotten.”



Sapelo Island has a long history with sugarcane, which is being cultivated again on the island for commercial purposes. (Courtesy Maurice Bailey)

Find Georgia Agriculture Online! [www.agr.georgia.gov](http://www.agr.georgia.gov)



@GeorgiaGrown: <https://twitter.com/>



[www.facebook.com/georgiagrown](http://www.facebook.com/georgiagrown)



@lamgeorgiagrown



Georgia Grown: <https://www.pinterest.com/GaDepAg/>



[www.facebook.com/GaMarketBulletin](http://www.facebook.com/GaMarketBulletin)

### Notice

Ads for the Nov. 18 issue are due by noon, Nov. 6. Ads begin posting online 13 days prior to the first publication date in the paper.