

The Fall Festival - Autumn Gold: Colors and Joys of the Harvest

In the rolling hills of Orange County, Virginia, the air in October carries a specific kind of joy that seems to spread everywhere. As the humidity of August fades into the crisp, amber-hued mornings of October, many of us think of pumpkin patches and apple cider. But for the African American community, the arrival of autumn has historically been more than a change in weather—it is a season of homecoming, a celebration of agricultural resilience, and a vital reclamation of joy. To understand the heart of these celebrations, we have to look back to the soil, across different lands and different eras.



Imagine a crisp evening in the late 19th century in the Low country of South Carolina. The air is thick with the scent of salt marsh and roasting corn. A community has gathered in a clearing, far from the watchful eyes of the plantation overseers who once claimed their labor. There is a rhythm here—the steady beat of a drum and the call-and-response of a song that has traveled across an ocean and survived a century of hardship. Among them is a grandmother, her hands calloused from decades of tending the earth, stirring a massive iron pot of

slow-simmered collard greens and smoked meats. For her, this gathering is a quiet act of rebellion seeking peace through sharing. By sharing food they grew and music they preserved, they are asserting that they belong to one another and to the land, regardless of who claims to own the deed. This was the seed of the fall festival: a space where the survival of the spirit was celebrated as much as the survival of the crop.

As the decades turned, this spirit of resilience traveled from the marshes of the coast to the rolling hills of Orange County, Virginia, the air in October carries a specific kind of joy that seems to spread everywhere. In this land, where the beauty of the landscape often contrasts with the heavy history of

the plantations that once dominated it, the harvest took on a new meaning. Imagine a Saturday morning in the mid-20th century: a father loading the old family car, the trunk smelling of burlap and anticipation. His children are buzzing in the backseat, their Sunday best swapped for sturdy boots and oversized sweaters.

For this family, a trip to the orchards is a victory. In a region where Black families once labored on land they could never own, the act of visiting a farm for *pleasure*—to pick fruit for the sheer joy of it—is a powerful assertion of freedom. As they pull into the orchard, the scent of ripening apples hits them like a wave. The children race ahead, competing to find the largest, reddest apple, while the father remembers his own grandfather teaching him how to "twist and lift" so as not to damage the bud for next year. Later, at the farm stand, the children watch with wide-eyed wonder as a vendor dips a tart Granny Smith into a cauldron of bubbling, cinnamon-scented red syrup. That first, sticky, sugary crunch of a candy apple is the official taste of childhood.

This legacy is not just a memory; it is a living practice. Today, this spirit is carried forward by modern stewards like Michael Carter Jr. of Carter Farms. An eleventh-generation farmer, Michael uses his platform and his non-profit foundation, *Africulture*, to honor the specific plants and agricultural practices that people of African descent brought to the Americas. By centering the narrative on the skill and sovereignty of Black farmers, he reminds us that the relationship between African Americans and the land is not just one of hardship, but one of immense cultural richness and expertise.

Today, that ancestral spirit lives on in the vibrant festivals that dot the American landscape every autumn. We see it in the Gullah Geechee celebrations of the coastal South and the bustling heritage festivals in urban centers. We see it in the roar of the crowds during HBCU homecoming weekends, where the precision of marching bands and the elegance of alumni attire turn campuses into living museums of Black excellence. We see it in local soul food festivals, where recipes passed down through generations serve as a reminder of the ingenuity of those who made a feast out of the meager portions they were given.

Whether it is the collective pride of carving a pumpkin with grandchildren or the shared warmth of a cider press, these traditions are an invitation to remember. They remind us that the "harvest" is not

just about produce, but about the wisdom, art, and strength harvested from a complex history. This season, as you visit a local fair, wander through an orchard, or share a meal with loved ones, take a moment to honor the legacies of those who found ways to dance, sing, and feast even in the hardest of times. The autumn air is cool, but the legacy of the Black harvest remains warm, welcoming, and eternally vibrant.