

WHEN CROP MOBS TAKE OVER¹

Tina Chadwick©

Crop Mob Atlanta is a new grassroots organization that's going a step further than buying and eating local food—they're actually going to the farms and volunteering on the weekends. From pulling weeds to watering, this all-ages and all-backgrounds team up every month or so to, literally, "mob" a local farm. "We've lost a sense of connection that comes with farmers and farming," says Kimberly Coburn, co-founder of Crop Mob Atlanta. "Nothing is more basic than the food we eat and we need to help people re-forge the relationship between food, land, people, and how each feeds the other."

Coburn and her partners, Mike Lorey and Darby Weaver, formed Crop Mob Atlanta in May after reading an article about the concept in North Carolina. Sun Dog Farms, Weaver's own farm, served as the inaugural location of the first mob in June. Since then, there have been two more major mobs and one mini-mob. "We first try to mob farms who have helped other farmers in past. Mob for Mobbers first," says Lorey, founder of Rationally Creative, which services sustainable businesses with creative marketing and design.

The first step to a Crop Mob is to identify an organic farm incorporating sustainable practices and work with the farmer and farm manager to identify projects appropriate for a mob's skill level. First time mobber Gabriel Charvat from Atlanta's westside says, "A typical city person doesn't know what they're doing, but by the end of the day you feel like you learned something real. You weed right along-side people you wouldn't ever meet in the city." "We get amazing gifts from the Earth and we should care about the people who tend to those gifts... I like to show the farmers that I don't just care about the food they grow but about them."

Michael Hendricks, the manager at Indian Ridge Farms, said the biggest issue at organic farms is weeds. "We just don't have the man-power to keep up with all the weeding since we don't use chemical controls," he says. Indian Ridge was the site of the July 25 mob. Other tasks mobs take on include building small structures, fixing animal enclosures, and general maintenance.

After a 9 a.m. start, mobbers work until 1 p.m., when a fantastic meal is served right in the field. Mobbers are encouraged to break whenever they need to or, when they just want to look around and appreciate the sights of the farm. There is no expectation, judgment, or measure of work. Every effort is appreciated and every contribution counted. So far, all Crop Mob meals have been supplied and prepared by renowned chef Steven Satterfield of Atlanta's farm-to-table restaurant, Miller Union.

When asked why he chooses to spend his day off from a grueling schedule at Miller Union in this way, he replies with conviction, "Anyone can work in a kitchen, put food on a plate and go home. The reason we opened the restaurant was to do something meaningful and there's no point in doing something you're not passionate about." There is a direct connection for Satterfield as the farmers are often suppliers to his restaurant. Of course, he could maintain those relationships at the local, more convenient farmers markets, but Satterfield prefers to be on site with Crop Mob. "We get amazing gifts from the earth and we should care about the people who tend to those gifts," Satterfield says. "People need to think and know about how the food gets on the plate and I like to be a part of seeing that moment. I like to show the farmers that I don't just care about the food they grow but about them and what they mean to all of us."

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Mobbers can be anyone of any age and a large percentage of mobbers have zero farming experience. Although Matt Stein, a concrete contractor, grew up around gardens, he joined the July mob to “get back in touch after being a city slicker for so long.” Stein's girlfriend, Almeta Tulloss, is a barista at Cafe Campesino in the Sweet Auburn Market. She got involved and her cafe donated the midday snack for the entire crew.

You'll also generally find previously mobbed farmers helping out at other farms. Emily Lendvay has attended all three Crop Mob events and works with a tiny organic farm in Atlanta. She tries to recruit friends declaring, “I want to help build back up the farm community because it's not part of society anymore and it very much should be.”

Ed Taylor owns the farm mobbed in July. He is a soft-spoken, wise soul who seems to glide over the uneven, rocky ground pointing out amazing facts about the jumble of plants. He points to berries and says they are a natural antidote to poison ivy. “What we are doing [organic farming] is a much more respectful way to treat the land. We are forcing our will on it and the best way to do that is with as little disruption to the natural cycle of things,” Taylor says.