If you’ve been farming or raising livestock for fewer than ten years, the Kerr Center has got a great deal for you: a free course in sustainable farming or ranching.

The third year of the Oklahoma Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program (OKBFRP) is set to begin in February. Space is limited. To be considered, you must fill out an application, available on the Kerr Center’s beginning farmer web page, or by calling the Kerr Center. Application deadline is Nov. 15.

The course consists of five Saturday training workshops. Participants choose to follow either a livestock or horticulture track. There is no charge for tuition or course materials and lunch is included, too!

Students will attend workshops either at the Kerr Center’s Farm and Ranch near Poteau or at the Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative (MFSI) office in Okmulgee. Prospective students are given the opportunity to choose which location they prefer (or if they have no preference), when they fill out the application.

Trainees should plan to attend every workshop in their track including the first orientation and planning class on Feb. 1, either at Poteau or Okmulgee.

The horticulture sessions then meet in March, May, and July; the livestock sessions in March, April, and June. The wrap-up class and graduation for both tracks will be held in August.

The classes will be a mix of classroom instruction and time out in the field with a focus on real-life problem-solving and hands-on skills. Workshops will include presentations, discussion, and demonstration of important techniques and equipment.

Students attending in Okmulgee will be connected via webinar to Poteau for presentations. Hands-on activities for the Okmulgee location will be coordinated by MFSI.

For each session, the center also provides resources for students to take home. (See beginning farmer course materials page at www.kerrcenter.com to view 2013 resources.)

Complete course information is online. Or you may call the Kerr Center at 918.647.9123 or email kerrcenter@gmail.com.

See page three for more about course content and page four for highlights from the 2013 course.
NEW ONLINE

The Kerr Center has been rapidly adding content to its online program descriptions and resources through the spring and summer. Here’s a sampling:

VIDEOS
The center’s compost page now hosts two videos on vermicomposting, and another one featuring Kerr Center consultant Luke Freeman’s introduction to composting. (All three are from the 2013 Beginning Farmer & Rancher Program’s horticulture track.) www.kerrcenter.com/stewardship/compost.html

PRESENTATIONS/SLIDESHOWS
A summary of 2013 intern Jonathan Pollnow’s biochar feedstock trial (see p. 19) is posted on the center’s on-farm fertility page: www.kerrcenter.com/stewardship/on-farm-fertility.htm

New to the Kerr Center, or need a refresher?
The ‘About’ page now features a slideshow that covers all the essentials of what the center does and how it came to be: www.kerrcenter.com/about.htm

The center’s agroforestry page got a recent facelift with this description of the various projects around the ranch - including the thinning harvest on the Between the Lakes project in early September (see p. 6): www.kerrcenter.com/stewardship/Agroforestry.html

New work on native pollinators and their habitat is the focus of this page: www.kerrcenter.com/stewardship/native-pollinators.html

Kate Atchley, a 2013 intern (see p. 18), worked at devising compost recipes to produce a finished quality product in the shortest possible time, using an approach described here: www.kerrcenter.com/stewardship/compost.html

PUBLICATIONS
The Kerr Center has issued several new publications over the summer, including these reports from the 2013 interns (see p. 17):

- Hot Composting with the Berkeley Method (Kate Atchley)
- The True Cost of Hay (Erin Jenkins)

Stay tuned for more from this year’s interns, including a report by Jonathan Pollnow on a biochar trial he conducted.

In the previous issue of Field Notes, we pointed out that George Kuepper’s publication on sweet sorghum production and processing, while more of a “classic” than a new publication, was newly available electronically. Not long after that, Mother Earth News ran a story on it. Read the Mother Earth story here...

http://tinyurl.com/k3tks8

…and download the pdf version of Sweet Sorghum: Production and Processing here: www.kerrcenter.com/publications/sorghum/sorghum.html

BEGINNING FARMER & RANCHER COURSE MATERIALS
Some of the various presentations and handouts from the 2013 Beginning Farmer & Rancher Program class sessions are mentioned above. The complete set is too numerous to list here - but it’s all available free online. Visit www.kerrcenter.com/beginning-farmer/course-materials.html.
Partners in the program are three educational/producer groups: the Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative (MFSI), the Oklahoma Farmers and Ranchers Association (OFRA) and the Rural Smallholder Association (RSA).

Members of these organizations have attended the workshops and are mentoring other beginning farmers in their groups.

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension is also a key partner.

In 2011, the Kerr Center and its partners received one of just 36 grants given nationwide to train the next generation of farmers and ranchers.

Course Overview

Horticulture

The 2014 Beginning Farmer horticulture training program will concentrate on small-to-intermediate scale market gardening, with a specific focus on vegetable crops for both fresh produce and seed crop sales.

Organic production will be emphasized, though most of the information and techniques to be covered are appropriate for conventional management as well.

Topics will include business and field planning, acquisition of supplies, organic certification, ground preparation and fertility management, irrigation, weed and pest control, harvest and post-harvest handling, and marketing.

The training will be balanced between classroom education, field demonstrations, and hands-on activities. This program is intended primarily for those with little or no experience in growing horticultural crops.

Livestock

The livestock track for the 2014 Beginning Farmer and Rancher program will have three full day workshops and one half day workshop.

The first workshop (March 15th) will address the importance of grazing management as it relates to the productivity of forage and livestock. We will look at designing a controlled grazing system that promotes healthy plants and increases forage utilization. Topics will include water development, the importance of livestock shade, and the use of permanent and temporary electric fence.

The second workshop (April 5th) will take place at Dr. David Sparks ranch near Porum, OK. He will address all aspects of small ruminant management. Dr. Sparks is employed by OSU extension, and, with his wife, runs both goats and cattle on their ranch.

The third workshop (June 21st) will address the basics of forage growth and soil fertility. Also, this workshop will focus on pasture plant identification. The last workshop (Aug. 16) will be a half day session addressing agroforestry, forestry, and riparian management.

Planning for Success

Business planning will be a component of both tracks and will introduce the basic concepts of a business plan. Students will develop a simple plan during the course of the class. The plan will cover goal-setting, marketing, operations, human resources, and finances.

The business planning will take place in the first class. A short follow up training will be included in the first sessions in the livestock and horticulture programs to focus on business planning concepts unique to the different tracks.

Ensuring your farm is sustainable

Both tracks emphasize proper management of natural resources on the farm. The Kerr Center’s Cannon Horticulture Project is certified organic. The program is known for its innovative work in organic soil-building, and weed management. The Kerr Ranch’s long-time focus on controlled (rotational) grazing makes it a leader in sustainable cattle production.

Course instructors have expertise in agronomy, animal science, agricultural economics, horticulture, natural resource management and organic production and certification.

(Note: topics and times are subject to change).

This project was supported by Agriculture and Food Research Initiative Competitive Grant no. 2011-49400-30525 from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture.
Jim Shrefler shares insights gleaned from years of research into organic production in SE Oklahoma.

Lena Moore (seated) and Liz Speake coordinate the live link with the MFSI training site in Okmulgee.

Karen Chism, complete with tassel, receives her certificate of completion from George Kuepper.

Warren Roberts discusses a seeder designed by Eliot Coleman for small-seeded crops in well-prepared soils, such as greens in hoophouses and greenhouses.
Beginning Farmer and Rancher - Livestock

Dr. David Sparks discusses the design of goat handling facilities.

Will Lathrop unreels polywire for a temporary electric fence, as Richard Vanderslice supplies step-in posts.

David Redhage shows students the center’s agroforestry project.

Clipped forage samples are weighed.

Simon Billy (fourth from left) discusses the Kerr Center’s watering tanks made from used tractor tires with (L-R) Roxanne and Joseph Loyless, Bill Wright, Erin Jenkins, Harry Smith, Rosann Moulis, and Philip Pearl.

David Redhage taught business planning.

Student Cliff Chism tosses a square-foot frame for a random forage sample location.

Philip Pearl receives his certificate of completion from Will Lathrop.
Twenty-year old loblolly pines started crashing to the ground on the Kerr Ranch in early September – the first thinning of the Between the Lakes agroforestry project. The harvested timber will be used as pulpwood and short sawlogs.

Planted in 1991 and 1992, the project won’t yield its final harvest for another 10 to 15 years, depending on how quickly the trees grow.

That may sound like a long time to wait for income in an agricultural enterprise. According to Kerr Center Interim Chief Program Officer David Redhage, many timber producers graze cattle on their forest acres to introduce a shorter-term income stream while waiting for the main crop to reach maturity.

“Livestock give an otherwise absent early cash flow in forestry operations,” he recently told a class in the Oklahoma Beginning Farmer & Rancher Program.

The Between the Lakes project started out as pasture, though, driving home the point that benefits flow both ways when livestock and timber operations share the same ground. “Shade is an important component of livestock operations in Oklahoma,” Redhage says, allowing cattle to use pastures more effectively in warmer months.

The project lies on steep slopes, so planting trees on the contour helped to control erosion and build soil. The tree cover also enhanced wildlife habitat, opening the possibility of yet another income source from the same acreage.

Site characteristics, species selection, and establishment methods all influence the design and success of agroforestry enterprises. Other agroforestry projects elsewhere on the ranch illustrate how these factors can play out differently.

Mix and Match

Many southeastern timber producers prefer loblolly pine over the region’s native shortleaf pine for its faster growth. The Kerr Center used loblolly pine in the 2003 Pine Ridge project. Four years later, though, the Woolbright project, planted to reclaim a scraped gas well site, did use shortleaf, since it had been observed to hold up better during ice storms.

Down in the Dean Rotation, on Senator Kerr’s old duck-hunting plots, pine of any kind simply would not fit the bill. A wildlife-friendly mixture including willow oak, pin oak, and bald cypress was planted instead.

According to Redhage, many commercial pine operations aerially spray herbicides to control hardwoods in pine plantings. The Kerr Center refrains from this practice in order to avoid the damage to nearby hardwood plantings on the ranch.

The 1990s plantings were established by the innovative technique of mowing the planting area, then raking the mown vegetation into windrows. Seedlings were planted directly into the windrows, and the deep mulch layer minimized competition from weeds.

More recent plantings have followed a deep plowing or “ripping” of a furrow along the contour at six-foot intervals. Seedlings are planted into the furrow, which helps control surface water runoff and channel it down to growing tree roots in the soil.

Redhage says it’s wise to take advantage of state and federal cost-share programs. Several are available, although some are limited to particular parts of the state. ODAFF’s Oklahoma Forestry Services division maintains an online listing at www.forestry.ok.gov/mgmt-grants.

WHAT’S ONLINE

On the center’s agroforestry webpages www.kerrcenter.com/stewardship/agroforestry.html find photos and information about agroforestry, the center’s projects, and forestry in the southeastern U.S.
Forty-five people gathered at the Kerr Ranch on April 27 to learn how to make their farms and ranches more resilient – able to rebound from setbacks like droughts and floods.

The workshop focused on increasing resilience by feeding the soil food web – the diverse mixture of organisms that live in a healthy soil. The workshop explored several practices that provide such “food” – including cover crops, compost, biochar, and compost teas and extracts.

All these practices add organic matter to the soil, helping to hold it in place during high winds or heavy rains. The added organic matter also acts like a sponge, soaking up more water during abundant rainfall, and holding onto it longer during dry spells.

The workshop featured soil health specialist Steve Diver, of Agri-Horticultural Consulting in Austin, Texas. With more than 30 years of experience in sustainable and organic agriculture, Diver is an expert on the soil food web.

Diver was joined by former Kerr Center horticulture program assistant Luke Freeman, George Kuepper, the center’s horticulture manager, and horticulture intern Jonathan Pollnow.

The day began with a biochar burn, turning sunflower stalks into charcoal that can be “charged” with compost to help hold water, nutrients, and beneficial microbes in soils.

The focus then turned to composting. The Kerr Center’s Cannon Horticulture Project grows large plots of cover crops, and turns much of that biomass into compost.

Compost can be applied directly to fields, but Diver explained an approach that requires less time, material, and labor: making compost tea, compost extracts, or other such “bio sprays,” and applying them to soils and/or crops.

After a tour and demonstration of these practices on the Cannon Horticulture Plots, the workshop moved indoors for the afternoon, where Diver lectured on the theory behind them.

The workshop was part of the center’s Resilient Farmer project, supported by a Conservation Innovation Grant (11-199) from USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

The project teaches organic and transitioning farmers how to reduce costs and labor, while building soil fertility and minimizing weeds, insect pests, and plant diseases. Kuepper is working closely with several farmers as part of the grant, and two workshops open to the public have been held. See calendar on back page for 2014 grant events.

WHAT’S ONLINE
On-Farm Fertility page: slideshows and presentations with how-to and background on biochar, compost and compost teas, and foliar fertilizers.

Compost page: videos and other resources with a more in-depth treatment of composting and vermicomposting.

Managing Organic Matter for Soil Health and Fertility Microbial Inoculants: Effective Microorganisms (EM) and Indigenous Microorganisms (IMO)
Steve Diver’s presentations from the 2012 and 2013 Resilient Farmer workshops.

Rotations, Cover Crops, and Green Fallow on the Cannon Horticulture Project: A 2010 Status Report
A publication by George Kuepper describing the Kerr Center’s rotation and cover crops, with an emphasis on warm-season cover crops.
The life story of Robert Samuel Kerr has all the hallmarks of an American legend. A big, bold man, with a commanding presence, he was born in a log cabin in 1896, in the Chickasaw Nation, in what was then Indian Territory. After enduring the deaths of his first wife and children, and suffering financial ruin when his business burned to the ground, his luck turned: he struck it rich in the oil business. He went on to become the first native son governor of Oklahoma during the ’40s. In the 1950s he reigned as “the uncrowned king” of the U.S. Senate.

As remarkable as these accomplishments are, Bob Kerr had a deeper ambition. In his book Land, Wood and Water he challenged his fellow citizens: “It is in our power, under the watchful eyes of God, to determine the physical form of the world in which we live. We can make it a paradise... or by neglect, permit it to become a desert. The choice is ours.”

At first glance, this millionaire oilman-politician seems an unlikely champion of the earth. However, Kerr grew up on a small farm keenly aware of how Oklahoma, the last wilderness east of the Rockies, was being transformed. Vast numbers of settlers had made the Land Runs of the 1880s and ’90s in search of free land. Towns had sprung up overnight with their schools and churches.

“But in addition to the good they wrought,” Kerr wrote, “the early Oklahoma settlers dangerously sapped the soil of its strength and fertility in their haste to get crops.” The “thick layer of spongy soil” that was Oklahoma’s treasure began to be lost with the plowing of the prairie. Fragile sandy hills were plowed only to blow away. Even land left unplowed was often overgrazed.

“In the forested regions of the state, indiscriminate cutting of trees had left hillsides scarred by erosion after every hard rain. Scarcely 40 years after the Land Runs, Oklahoma had a greater percentage of eroded land than any other state.”

Kerr felt called to do something about this state of affairs. He had witnessed Oklahoma’s boom and
bust cycles and never forgot what his father told him one day as they worked in the cotton fields: “I want you to help refurbish that land that men have stripped and clear the streams they have muddied.”

Mr. Oklahoma

Kerr would have to travel far from home before he could fulfill his father’s ambition for him. First as governor from 1943 to 1947 and then as U.S. Senator from 1948 to 1963, Kerr had an opportunity to give back to the state that had given him so much.

In Washington, he became a tireless campaigner for Oklahoma; in fact, his zealously earned him the nickname “Mr. Oklahoma.”

As chair of Senate Select Committee on National Water Resources, Kerr was the motivating force behind the huge (costing over one billion dollars) Arkansas Basin Project. Its centerpiece was the channeling of the Arkansas and the Verdigris Rivers creating a year-round direct water route from Tulsa to the Gulf of Mexico.

This was a seemingly impossible project; Will Rogers once said it would be easier to pave the Arkansas than make it navigable. But Rogers probably hadn’t counted on Bob Kerr.

While lambasted as a boondoggle at the time by some of his political opponents, the channel has had an important economic impact on eastern Oklahoma. But navigation was only one benefit Kerr saw in such water projects -- he also saw them as conservation projects.

Kerr used his political power for conservation. He sponsored bills making these water projects possible, not only in Oklahoma but across the nation. He also coauthored the Pollution Control Act that provided money for adequate sewage treatment and water pollution research. And he authored a bill to broaden soil conservation projects.

Kerr made his case for conservation in his landmark 1960 book, Land, Wood and Water. The title came from something his father once said to him: “To raise a family, you have to have three things – land, wood and water.”

Far from being a dull political tome, the book sparkles with Kerr’s insight and passion for stewardship.

For him, conservation equaled national security. How could America compete if she had to feed a growing population on eroding farmland? How could she meet the housing needs of her people if timberland was vanishing or provide pure water to them if rivers were polluted?

While politician Kerr was orchestrating large-scale conservation measures, citizen Kerr came home to Oklahoma to begin a more personal conservation project.

“I had spent years persuading others to believe in the future and to conserve our land, wood and water. Here was my chance to put into practice what I had been saying,” he wrote.

Wonderland Workshop

In the ’50s, Kerr had discovered the wild beauty of the Poteau River Valley and the Ouachita Mountains in southeastern Oklahoma. The ridge tops and south-facing slopes of these mountains were originally heavily forested with shortleaf pine. Hardwoods such as sweetgums, oaks, and maples thrived on moist, northern slopes and along rivers. Here he began working in what he called his “wonderland workshop.”

It was a new kind of work for him. The first sawmills had been set up in the area 100 years before. The best trees had long ago been cut “with no thought of the future,” wrote George Phillips, Oklahoma’s first forester. One of citizen Kerr’s first conservation projects was the replanting of pine seedlings on the slopes of Poteau Mountain.

“I cannot describe the joy of planting under the sun and the quickly moving clouds,” he wrote. “It gives a new faith in tomorrow...”

Kerr eventually bought around 60,000 acres of land – from bottomland to rough mountain top – near Poteau in LeFlore County. Looking toward retirement, he built a native stone house on a bluff with one of the best views in Oklahoma.

He established the Kermac cattle herd, famous for its 1000 head of registered Angus cattle and its star bull,
2010
HENRY BELLMON AWARD for SUSTAINABILITY QUALITY OF LIFE for ALL SUSTAINABILITY AWARD to James E. Horne, PhD, President and CEO, Kerr Center Sustainable Tulsa

CONSERVATION LEADERSHIP AWARD for Outstanding Contribution to the Preservation of Oklahoma’s Agricultural Resources to James E. Horne, PhD, President and CEO, Kerr Center Land Legacy

2009
LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD to James E. Horne, PhD, President and CEO, Kerr Center Keep Oklahoma Beautiful

OUTSTANDING PUBLIC SERVICE through ECONOMICS AWARD to James E. Horne, PhD, President and CEO, Kerr Center Northeastern Agricultural and Resources Economists Association

2009
2002
ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AWARD for Future Farms conferences and The Next Green Revolution: Essential Steps to a Healthy, Sustainable Agriculture Sierra Club, Oklahoma Chapter

2000
MERIT AWARD for Advocating Conservation of Soil, Water and Related Natural Resources Soil and Water Conservation Society of America

2005
DISTINGUISHED YORK LECTURER in SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE James E. Horne, PhD., President and CEO, Kerr Center Auburn University

2005
AWARD OF EXCELLENCE for the Oklahoma Producer Grants Program Keep Oklahoma Beautiful
Support the Kerr Center in 2014!
HONOR THE LEGACY OF SENATOR KERR!

Since 1965 the Kerr Center has been reaching out to folks in Oklahoma and beyond. Today, the Friends of the Kerr Center help us continue this vital work! We have many innovative educational projects ongoing, but we need your help to continue our work! If you enjoy reading this newsletter or visiting our website, or if you have participated in one of our educational events (or know someone who has), please consider making a gift to the Kerr Center today!

Your contribution is important to the future of sustainable agriculture!

As a friend of the Kerr Center, your donation supports our many educational programs and activities, including:

- Field Notes, our free newsletter
- kerrcenter.com, our comprehensive website
- Workshops, conferences and field days
- Reports and fact sheets
- Research and demonstration projects
- Intern program

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☐ CULTIVATOR $50 - $199
☐ HARVESTER $200 - $999
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I am interested in knowing more about donating assets either now or as an estate-planning tool. Please send me more information or call me at (____) ____________________

Thank you for your generosity. Your gift is tax deductible.

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Check enclosed for $_________ payable to Kerr Center.

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the prodigious Hyland Marshall, who sired 7000 calves over his lifetime. There was even a poem, “Oklahoma’s Greatest Ranch,” written by an admirer, Sam Scantlan. One stanza describes the idyllic scene:

And the cattle grazing slowly on the glade
Were fat from having nothing else to do,
Except to eat the grass and rest in the shade
And raise five thousand calves, which now were due

It would have been out of character for Kerr to live in lordly isolation from his neighbors. He meant his ranch to be a model for area ranchers.

“In this part of Oklahoma, which is so rich in beauty, but so poor for farming,” writes his daughter Kay of her father’s intentions, “he wanted to challenge farmers and demonstrate the potential increases in pasture and cattle production which could come with improving soil fertility, using higher quality breeding stock, and developing better overall management.”

His first efforts at clearing water-logged bottoms and establishing pastures, however, were greeted with skepticism by at least one old-timer who wondered out loud if he wasn’t “a dumb fool, and eccentric, too.”

This pronouncement did not stop him from talking up his plans with area farmers and learning all he could from them at the same time. Close friends have noted his ability to communicate with all varieties of folk: black and white, rich and poor.

His presence and concern gave people in the area a feeling of optimism about their economic future, one businessman remembered years later.

On his only presidential trip to Oklahoma, in late October 1961, President John F. Kennedy dedicated a highway in the Ouachita Mountains and visited the Kerrmac Ranch as a guest of Senator Kerr.

The senator showed the president his prize Angus bulls and treated him to a steak dinner.

With the 60th anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Tulsa’s Emmy-award winning journalist Scott Thompson (KOTV, News on 6) will be doing a story on this historic visit. It will air on Thursday, Oct. 31, during the 10 p.m. newscast.
On breaks from the Senate, he stayed at the ranch, overseeing its operations and entertaining. His guests included Vice President Lyndon Johnson, Tennessee Senator Albert Gore, Sr. (father of Vice President Al Gore), and most memorably, President John F. Kennedy (see sidebar).

Kerr worked closely with the president. He shared Kennedy’s dream of sending a man to the moon, and as Chairman of the Senate Space Committee was a key supporter of the space program. Unfortunately, Bob Kerr did not live to see a man on the moon or the barges on the McClellan-Kerr Navigation Channel or to retire to his beloved ranch. He died suddenly fifty years ago, on New Year’s Day 1963.

Living Legacy

Not long after the senator’s death, a nonprofit charitable foundation, the Kerr Foundation, was established by his widow Grayce B. Kerr and their four children, Robert Jr., William, Breene, and Kay.

In 1965-66, the Kerr Foundation’s Agriculture Division was established to carry on Senator Kerr’s work in conservation-oriented agriculture. Headquartered on the Kerr Ranch near Poteau, it gained a national reputation for its work with animal health, and independent examiners concluded in 1984 that the Agricultural Division had had a “considerable impact on many farms and ranches of southeast Oklahoma and western Arkansas.”

In 1986, the Agricultural Division became a new foundation, the Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Inc., guided by with the Senator’s daughter Kay Kerr Adair who still serves, along with her daughter Christy Price, on the center’s board of trustees.

Today it is the largest private operating foundation dedicated to sustainable agriculture. Under the leadership of Kerr Center president Jim Horne, the center has been acclaimed for its wide-ranging educational initiatives.

Today the center carries on the senator’s commitment to soil conservation and health; water quality; sustainable forestry; and outreach to farmers and ranchers.

Oh yes, and to cattle. Angus cattle still graze slowly in the glade on the Kerr Ranch. But as Kerr President Jim Horne points out, they don’t look much like Hyland Marshall. Times change, he says, as do the needs of ranchers and consumers.

Kerr Livestock Manager Will Lathrop has worked for years to develop an Angus X (with Gelbvieh) well-adapted to the conditions on the Kerr Ranch. Controlled grazing keeps the grass on the ranch growing almost year round and the cattle thrive on it.

As a result the cows and calves still grow fat, having nothing else to do except eat the grass and rest in the shade.

Inspired by the words of Sen. Kerr and the legacy of the Kerrmac Ranch, Poteau has adopted the Angus bull as a symbol of the town. In February of this year, the City and Chamber of Commerce unveiled a new project for the city called “Bulls for Poteau.” Since that time a “herd” of one dozen has arrived to Poteau. These large statues are being placed at businesses around town (including the Kerr Center) and being painted by local artist Teresa Farrington.

City leaders want Poteau to be recognized as a place where “the economy and environment are being improved upon with great progress and pride.” Check our website for photos of the Kerr Center bull as they become available.
"I Hate Okra": Growing Heirloom Seed for Baker Creek

by Bill Edgar

I hate okra; we just don’t grow it," a farmer friend of mine recently said, to which I thought, “What planet are you from?”

He is from New York - planet Manhattan. If you are not from the South, then you just wouldn’t understand this big Ethiopian relative to hibiscus. But down here in southeastern Oklahoma (“Little Dixie,” we call it), okra is king, and for good reason - it grows like crazy.

If there were any crop that I would say has to be in every southern market garden, it would be okra. I call it an anchor crop. It is that one crop that hardly ever fails, and is always in demand.

I have only had one crop failure with okra. It was in 2010, when I did not have irrigation and we had 50-plus days of 100-degree weather - hot enough to send the devil packing for cooler weather. I still harvested a few pods, though.

Also, okra sells! I remember watching customers empty out the established farm booth at the Norman market by nine, then seeing the latecomers empty me out before noon. I’ve had wholesalers offer to buy every pound of okra I could produce. Southerners love okra!

In 2007, I bought some okra seed, an heirloom variety called Burmese, from the Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company. It grew and grew, and after it reached 12 feet, I took a picture of it and e-mailed it to Baker Creek. They were so impressed that they asked to purchase some seed back.

That was six seasons ago, and I have grown okra seed for Baker Creek every year since. Not only has okra been the foundation of my market garden over the past six years, it has also been the foundation for a contract seed enterprise. I have grown many different types of vegetable seed for Baker Creek over the years, but I have always grown okra.

When I started at the Kerr Center in May, I brought my seed contract with me. We are growing melons, eggplant, peppers, and, of course, okra. In May I direct-seeded six rows, each 200 feet long. This took about ten packets of seed, which Baker Creek furnished free of charge as part of the contract.

Once the little plants popped out of the ground, I installed one line of drip tape between the rows to supply water to the plants on either side. In other words, one line of drip tape watered two rows. I only turned on the irrigation once this year due to the incredibly wet summer. Last year, I was watering all night every other night.

As far as weeding is concerned, I went through with a hula hoe once all season, as okra usually shades out...
any competing weeds. I think the lack of weeding by far makes up for the added labor of harvesting. Speaking of harvesting, at 6’ 4”, I can appreciate the six-foot tall plants vs. the ground-level purple hull peas next to them.

I am unsure exactly how many plants we had total, but we were harvesting two five-gallon buckets of pods a day. This could easily supply a farmer’s market table for the entire season.

Now that Labor Day has passed, the markets are closing up and farmers are scaling back to fall gardens (or putting them to bed altogether). Here, we are just starting to harvest okra - not for food, but for seed. Now that we have started letting the pods get long and dried out, we can harvest the seed out of them, package them up, and send them to Baker Creek. Come January, we will be issued a check, which will be a good financial jump-start for next season.

Now, who in his right mind could ever hate okra!

Tune in to the spring 2014 issue of Field Notes for a rundown of the results of our seed harvest.

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**Choctaw Youth Learn About Ag**

*–Maura McDermott*

This summer the Kerr Center once again participated in the Choctaw Nation’s Youth Work Experience Programs (formerly Summer Youth Program).

Dylon Owens, Dakota Henderson, Billy Wayne Gullick, and Dillan Seyler worked full time on the Kerr Ranch for five weeks this summer.

“These boys were very good workers,” says Simon Billy, ranch operations foreman, and himself a member of the Choctaw Nation. “They did a lot of hard work.”

The work included cleaning out fence rows, taking down barbed wire fence and replacing it with electric fence, and putting in gravity-flow and well watering points for Kerr cattle.

The program gives participants the opportunity to learn good work habits and get some work experience, says Billy.

“We were depending on them,” he adds. His goal for the young workers was for them to learn to “do it once and get it right,” and “to take pride in their work.”

Before arriving the four didn’t know much about Kerr Center. They learned a lot about the center’s programs and what it takes to maintain a working ranch.

This was the third summer the Kerr Center has supervised youth in the program.

The programs are a win-win for both the youth participants and the employers who hire them. “This introduces the kids to the workforce,” says Patty Mink, director over the programs, “and the employers are not out any money to take on them on because we pay their wages.”

“They job shadow at different businesses,” says Mink, “and it can be any type of business, public, government, nonprofit – we let them choose. We try to get the kids to do something that they enjoy or that they think they may want to do later on in life and get a feel for it.”

Two of the four working at the center discovered they enjoyed working in agriculture, and may be back next summer.

“It’s a great program for Choctaw kids,” says Billy.
The humble honeybee made it to the cover of Time magazine in August with the alarming headline “A World Without Bees.”

According to the article, over one-third of US honeybee colonies died or disappeared during the past winter. This bee-pocalypse comes at a time when the need for bees has never been higher: since the 1950s crop acreage requiring bee pollination has doubled. Bees are essential to myriad fruit and vegetable crops.

There is also much concern about declines in some species of native bees. Natives are crucial: hundreds of species of native bees contribute to $3 billion worth of pollination each year.

The causes for the declines are complicated and still being studied—disease, pesticides, and loss of habitat are thought to be the major culprits.

The Kerr Center has joined the fight to help save the pollinators. Through controlled burns, controlled grazing, plantings of pollinator-friendly plants and other best management practices, the center is providing plentiful habitat for these most essential insects.

This material is based upon work supported by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under number 69-7335-1-21.
From cattle to compost, with cross-country farm visits along the way, the Kerr Center’s 2013 student interns did a little bit of everything.

Kate Atchley, Erin Jenkins, and Jonathan Pollnow filled the intern roster for the summer. All three are plant and soil science majors - Atchley as a transfer from Eastern Oklahoma State College to Tarleton State in Texas, and Jenkins and Pollnow at OSU.

In addition to helping with daily chores and ongoing projects, each intern undertook an individual project during the summer. Pollnow and Atchley, in the horticulture program, worked on biochar and composting, respectively. Jenkins delved into the costs associated with baling hay on the farm versus buying it in. Findings from these projects are summarized below, and detailed in reports available free online (see p. 2).

The horticulture interns also hit the road to visit other operations, getting a feel for a wider range of production and marketing practices. On a single day in June, the interns visited both Greenleaf Nursery in Tahlequah (the nation’s 3rd largest nursery, with over 600 acres and hundreds of employees), and Three Springs Farm, a 20-acre certified organic market farm run solely by its two owners.

Another June trip took the interns to Custar Farms in Okemah - another small produce farm, but with conventional rather than organic management, and marketing through an on-farm store rather than at a farmers’ market.

The last trip of the interns’ summer agricultural odyssey took them to Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company in Mansfield, Missouri. (See p. 14 for more.) The overnight visit fell during one of the company’s monthly Heritage Day Festivals, and included a visit and tour of the grounds by founder/owner Jere Gettle.
Kate Atchley

“There was not a day I didn’t work hard growing up,” says Kate Atchley. That work ethic, instilled on her family’s dairy farm in Blanket, Texas, as well as in FFA projects, prepared her well for the schedule of a Kerr Center intern.

“At the Kerr Center, I thought there was a lot to learn,” she says, “and my professors at Eastern explained to me that it is a very good opportunity.”

Her experience lived up to those expectations. “I learned so much more than I expected; every day was a new experience.”

“George Kuepper has taught so many things on organic gardening,” she says. “I am so grateful to have worked as an intern under him.”

Switching gears from her livestock-oriented upbringing, Atchley spent her summer on the Cannon Horticulture Project. In addition to pitching in with the daily chores there, she developed her own project, working out recipes for quick-turnaround or “hot” compost using materials available on the Kerr ranch.

In the composting study, Atchley says, “I have found unique ways to put everyday farm wastes to use.” “I believe there should never be a waste of natural resources.”

Erin Jenkins

Like Atchley, Erin Jenkins had plenty of farm experience growing up – tending the stock on her family’s hog farm near Henryetta, participating in all manner of FFA events, and working as an assistant at her father’s veterinary hospital.

Unlike Atchley, Jenkins stuck with what she knew for her internship, working in the Kerr Center’s livestock program. But it turned out that there was much more to what she knew than she thought.

“I think my favorite skill I’ve learned as an intern would have been learning how to drive the tractor,” she says. “I’ve lived on a farm my whole life, yet I had never driven a tractor. Now I love it!”

Other lessons were more fundamental. “My father usually bales his own hay bales for his cattle. That’s how I thought it was always done,” Jenkins says. “When Will Lathrop told me that his goal is to go the entire year without having to use hay bales, I thought that was crazy.”

“But after doing a study of the true cost of hay and practicing grazing management, I now understand his point,” she continues. “There’s much more to the cost of hay besides the equipment and labor. What I’ve learned this summer is that it’s cheaper to buy bales of...
Jenkins wrote a report, available free on the Kerr Center website, comparing the costs and returns of hay- ing and grazing.

"Now that I’ve learned more about the soil we walk on, I’ve become more cautious about how we treat it,” she says.

Jonathan Pollnow

Jon Pollnow came into the internship program from an environmental science/natural resources background, with agricultural experience limited to employment in a wheat breeding program and some gardening.

Of his five-month exposure to market-scale organic farming in the Kerr Center’s horticulture program, he relates, “I learned a lot of practical skills that couldn’t really be taught in the classroom.”

“The experience has definitely sharpened skills I took from the classroom, while giving me new tools and new ways to think about things,” Pollnow says. “Cover crop management, composting, vermiculture, enhanced scientific experimental and statistical skills, are just some of the skills I picked up.”

“I suspected, but did not anticipate, how much thought and homework is involved with running a successful farm, organically or not. You have to study your crops from seedling to maturity, and get to know how different things like water flow, solar radiance, and even wind activity work on a field.”

“You have to be flexible, and you have to have the willingness to learn and consider alternatives.”

Pollnow was drawn to the internship by the Kerr Center’s work with biochar and composting.

“Sustainability to me means taking advantage of all the resources available, including things hitherto considered waste material,” he says. “Composting and biochar are avenues that can make these waste materials more useful.”

Pollnow carried out a trial making biochar from eight different feedstocks obtained from the Kerr Ranch, measuring how much each improved the organic matter content of the same sandy soil mix. Results of the biochar feedstock trial are available in a free report from the Kerr Center website.

“Making and researching biochar, working with it extensively, was fascinating to me. It is my philosopher’s stone. To me it isn’t some ancient technique, but cutting edge nanotechnology with huge potential for Oklahoma.”

“I became interested in sustainable ag because agriculture provides a possible sink for all sorts of inputs derived from waste materials. I am also interested in the efficient use of natural resources such as land, water and inputs - so I am interested in sustainable agriculture because it seeks to stem or limit soil erosion and use fertilizer wisely.”

“These issues directly affect a farmer’s pocketbook, but they also affect the rest of us in terms of water pollution, water depletion, and the cost of food.”

A Growth Experience

“The Kerr Center is a family, and for three months I became a part of it,” says Kate Atchley. “The people employed here are very welcoming and have made everything to easy to adapt to.”

“Before this summer, I had no idea what I wanted to do with the rest of my life,” says Erin Jenkins. “I have an interest in plants, soil, and the environment, and a degree in animal science. However, I had no clue what I could do with them. Today, I still am a little lost, but I have a better idea what I want to do; preserving our land, educating others on better land management, and building sustainable agriculture.”

“The internship at the Kerr Center has been fascinating and every day has been worth it,” says Jon Pollnow. “I have met a lot of amazing people through this unique organization.”

“The Kerr Center and its activities provide a great chance for people to network and share ideas and build their communities. Also, they get to take back the things they learn and teach their friends and neighbors. Who knows, someone might take away from what they learn here and pretty soon it has revolutionized how things are done over a whole region.”

The Kerr Center internship can be such a positive experience that students return for a second exposure. At least that’s the case for Katie Kilpatrick, who pulled her first stint in summer 2012, and is currently back on the ranch for a fall hitch.

Applications for 2014 internships are being accepted through Feb. 15. For details, visit www.kerrcenter.com/stewardship/interns.html.
Calendrier: Automne/Hiver

2014 Oklahoma Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program (voir dossier couverture)

Le Kerr Center accepte actuellement des candidatures pour le programme de débutant fermier et rancher 2014. Les cours sont dispensés mensuellement au Kerr Center à Poteau et bimensuellement au Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative, les bureaux situés à Okmulgee.

Les étudiants peuvent choisir un cursus agriculture ou vache. Les deux cursus dispensent des cours d’organisation et de gestion des ressources naturelles. Les étudiants reçoivent des bourses qui couvrent les frais de scolarité et les matériaux.

Les cours sont un mix de cours théoriques et de temps dans le champ avec une éducation à la résolution de problèmes réels et compétences d’ingénieur. Le centre offre des ressources extensives pour les étudiants de se former à leur propre rythme.

Key dates for the 2014 Beginning Farmer & Rancher Program are:

November 15 Applications due
December 18 Scholarship recipients notified
February 1 Orientation; Planning for success
March 8 Horticulture #1
March 15 Livestock #1
April 5 Horticulture #2
May 31 Livestock #2
June 21 Horticulture #3
July 12 Graduate
August 16 Graduation

Apply at www.kerrcenter.com

E-FIELD NOTES

Field Notes is also available via email. An electronic subscription also includes occasional event notices and other updates not included in the print version. To subscribe, visit www.kerrcenter.com and click on the button that says “Sign up for our e-newsletter and notifications!”

DEADLINE:
Kerr Center Internship Applications
February 15

The Kerr Center’s internship program is accepting applications for 2014. For an idea of what internships involve, see p. 17; for application details, see p. 19, or visit www.kerrcenter.com/stewardship/interns.html.

WORKSHOP: New Horizons in Organic Systems and Creative Produce Marketing
June 7, 2014

This workshop will begin with a visit to a popular farmers’ market in the Little Rock area, and conclude with farm tours and presentations at the Crimmins vegetable farm and Heifer Ranch, in Perryville, Arkansas. Details forthcoming on the events calendar at www.kerrcenter.com.

Visit the Kerr Center
Second Tuesday of each month.

During these guided tours, visitors see current horticulture, livestock and conservation projects.


All other visits must be requested at least two weeks in advance.

To register for Kerr Center events, and for more information on these and other upcoming sustainable agriculture events, visit the online events calendar at www.kerrcenter.com.