



Field Notes

Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture E-Newsletter

E-Field Notes
January 2017

Happy 2017 from the Kerr Center! In this issue, we take a look at some **often-overlooked benefits of weeds** – and how to encourage them.

Cattle often shed weight over the winter. One of our older reports compared the **cost-effectiveness of different approaches to helping cattle gain back those pounds in time for successful breeding**.

For those eagerly paging through the brand-new seed catalogs that this time of year brings, we've also got a pointer to a more recent report that evaluated **small-scale techniques and equipment for growing and harvesting sweet potatoes**.

Kerr Center President David Redhage is in the midst of a whirlwind of travel to the many sustainable agriculture conferences that crop up every year in this season. As a result, there's no president's note to share in this issue - but he'll be back next month with a summary of what he's been seeing, doing, and learning in his travels.

A special [thank-you to our supporters!](#)

In this issue:

Taking the "Weed" Out of "Milkweed"

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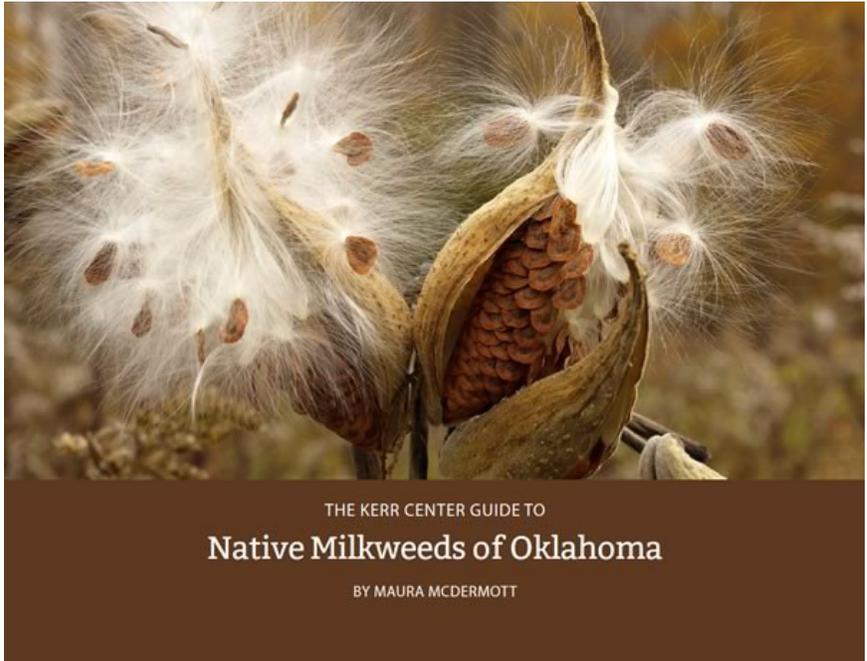
Small-Scale Sweet Potato Production

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Taking the "Weed" Out of "Milkweed"

Researchers at Cornell University recently found that **leaving a few weeds in cornfields may actually help the corn crop** - when the weeds are host species for beneficial insects.

In particular, the study found that native milkweeds are a host plant for species of aphids that produce a nectar eaten by wasps of the genus *Trichogramma*. *Trichogramma* wasps lay their eggs inside the eggs of a notorious corn pest - the European corn borer. So, **by leaving the "weeds" be, farmers can actually reduce crop damage from insect pests.**



Whether you want milkweeds in the cornfield or the front yard, the Kerr Center has a **guide to help you select the species best adapted to different areas of Oklahoma and the surrounding region.**

[*Native Milkweeds of Oklahoma*](#), written by former Kerr Center Communications Director Maura McDermott, lists common and scientific names of Oklahoma's native milkweeds, where they grow in the state, bloom period, and status as a host plant. It's **available free from the Kerr Center website.**

Compensatory Gain

With the holidays only just past, many of us have been loosening our belts a notch and pledging to put in more hours of exercise to burn off the extra pounds from all the feasting and sweet treats. For cattle, the situation is essentially the opposite.



Over the winter months, grown cattle can actually lose weight, as their maintenance requirements outstrip the energy available in forage.

Many ranchers feed energy supplements to avoid this, but others rely solely on "compensatory gain" - the ability of cattle to put those lost pounds back on in the spring, by increasing their consumption of fresh green forage.

The compensatory-gain approach has lower input costs, but may cause cattle to achieve their breeding weight later in the breeding season.

A Kerr Center study from the early 2000s put hard numbers to both sides of that scale, measuring both animal performance and economic returns in different groups of heifers. The resulting publication, [Compensatory Gain](#), is still available free online, and its implications for Oklahoma ranchers' bottom lines are as relevant as ever.

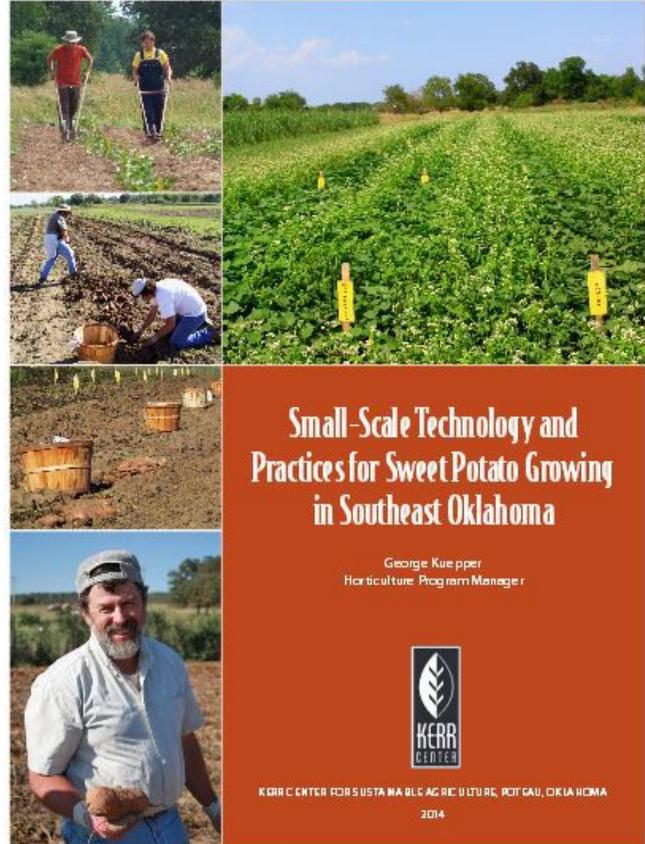
Small-Scale Sweet Potato Production

As farmers seek to expand their operations, they commonly encounter a **dilemma of scale**: to significantly ramp up production, they need to invest in equipment whose cost is so high that it can't be recovered soon enough to justify its purchase.

The Kerr Center's horticulture program spent several seasons trying to find that equation's **sweet spot for a sweet crop: sweet potatoes**. It looked at methods that are available to small-scale farmers, saving labor without breaking the bank.

Some of the specific practices evaluated included **growing slips in a greenhouse, building planting ridges with a wheel hoe, hand-harvesting with long-handled digging forks, and field curing**.

Results and observations from this **multi-year project** are detailed in the report, [*Small-Scale Technology and Practices for Sweet Potato Growing in Southeast Oklahoma*](#), available free from the Kerr Center website.



February Events: Native Plants, Blackberries, Plasticulture

This month's slate of sustainable agriculture-related events includes the **Oklahoma Native Plant Society's annual "Indoor-Outing"** (Feb. 4 - Tulsa) the first of a **four-part course on blackberry production** (Feb. 9 - Clarksville, AR), and **ODAFF's annual plasticulture conference** (Feb. 10 - Wayne)

FEB 4 Sat	Oklahoma Native Plant Society 2017 Indoor-Outing @ Tulsa Garden Center Feb 4 @ 8:30 am – 4:00 pm	Tickets
FEB 9 Thu	Blackberry Production Training Classes (Part 1 of 4) @ Clarksville, AR Feb 9 all-day	Tickets
FEB 10 Fri	Plasticulture Conference @ Wayne (Mid America Technology Center) Feb 10 – Feb 11 all-day	
FEB 14 Tue	Tour the Kerr Center @ Kerr Center Feb 14 @ 9:00 am	
FEB 23 Thu	MOSES Organic Farming Conference @ La Crosse, WI (La Crosse Center) Feb 23 – Feb 25 all-day	Tickets

The Kerr Center's online [events calendar](#) provides full details on these and many other upcoming sustainable agriculture events around the state and region. It also serves as a reminder for the dates of **monthly Kerr Center tours**, which run all year round, every second Tuesday by appointment.

Don't forget that you can also use our online calendar to **keep yourself and your friends up to date** on these and other upcoming events, including our tours:

- **Subscribe to our feed** and receive **updates to your personal calendar** (Outlook, Google+, etc.) as they are made.
- **Share events on the calendar** via a number of **different social media sites**, including Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest.

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