Field Notes

Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture E-Newsletter

E-Field Notes
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Tired of the same old, same old? Try it a different way in May!

This month's president's note reports on how researchers at the University of Arkansas are **moving table grapes into high tunnels to escape pests** - with promising results so far.

Why sit around the sale barn when you can **sell your cattle on TV**? We explain **what the Kerr Center livestock program gains from that approach**.

Similarly, **why make compost the old-fashioned way when worms can do it faster and more effectively**? The Kerr Center has **videos to show you the ropes**.

Lastly, **why limit pollinator plantings to wildflowers, when there are plenty of trees and shrubs that can play a valuable part**? Our guide can **help you select the best species for your location**.

As always, **if you value our work, please consider supporting it**!

President's Note: Table Grape High Tunnel Research

At the University of Arkansas, Dr. Elena Garcia is conducting research on **growing table grapes in high tunnels**. I have seen her present results at two conferences, the last being at the Arkansas/Oklahoma Horticulture Industries Show in January.

I find the preliminary results interesting, since **table grapes are extremely challenging to grow in the south**, even with full spray programs.

Image credit: Ayanava Majumdar

Dr. Garcia is using a **mix of season modification technologies, insect exclusion techniques, and regionally developed fruit varieties** in her work. **Netting is used on the roll-up sides of the high tunnels to keep insects out, and the plastic keeps rainfall from wetting the fruit and plant, reducing fungal problems**.

Her research is showing that Arkansas developed table grape varieties (Faith, Hope and Mars) can do very well under high tunnels. **In the field, table grapes start commercial yielding in year three, but in the high tunnel, commercial yields start the year after planting**. From an economic standpoint, this is very important.

Yields and fruit quality are higher in the high tunnels compared to field-grown table grapes. **Some sprays are still used in the high tunnels, but current research is showing a reduction in sprays**. In 2013, only three fungicide sprays were needed in the high tunnel, vs. eight or more in the field. Only two insecticide sprays were used in the high tunnel, vs. four to six in the field, depending on the season.

Dr. Garcia thinks that with more research, she may be able to grow table grapes organically in Arkansas!

Continue reading....

Selling Cattle on TV

Image credit: Oklahoma Farm Report

The Kerr Center has long emphasized the need for **sound economics as an essential element of sustainable agriculture**: no matter how environmentally friendly the farming system, it won't last long if it loses money.

Much of the time, practical advice and training on that point focuses on reducing costs - but there's ground to be gained on the increasing-income side of the equation as well. At sale time, **ranchers have some options for getting the best prices** they possibly can.

Over the decades, the Kerr Center has explored several of those options – specialty sales, direct marketing – and still finds a place for many of them depending on the circumstances.

For the past several years, though, the **Kerr Center livestock program has been selling most of its animals through a televised auction service**.

A truckload - fifty thousand pounds of beef - is the minimum qualifying amount. The auction service sends a representative to the ranch to record video of the cattle and write up a contract specifying the target weight and the sale date.

Auctions happen every two weeks. The seller can specify a minimum, and the representative can push for that - but if the bids don't get high enough, the seller has the option to decline them and try again the next time around.

If the sale doesn't go through, there's a $2 per head fee to cover paperwork and overhead. When a sale does go through, the auction service charges a 2% commission, and the buyer pays the trucking costs.

Being free of hormone implants and antibiotics, the Kerr Center's animals qualify as "**all natural," which brings a $2 per hundredweight premium.**

Vermicomposting on Video

One of the more popular selections in the **Kerr Center's video archives** is a **primer on vermicomposting** by former horticulture program assistant Luke Freeman.

Filmed during a workshop, the video covers the basics of **using worms to turn plant residues into the "black gold" of worm castings**.

If that whets your appetite for all things wiggly, t**he vermicomposting video has a sequel**.

Vermicomposting at Kerr Center I

Or, if you'd prefer not to have bait as a byproduct of your composting operation, the **Kerr Center's composting pages** offer a **wealth of resources on other approaches to composting** - at scales ranging from kitchen bins to livestock carcasses.

All this composting material is only a portion of the larger **Kerr Center horticulture library**, **all free online** in electronic format.

Trees & Shrubs for Pollinators

Pollinator plantings don't have to be limited to wildflowers.

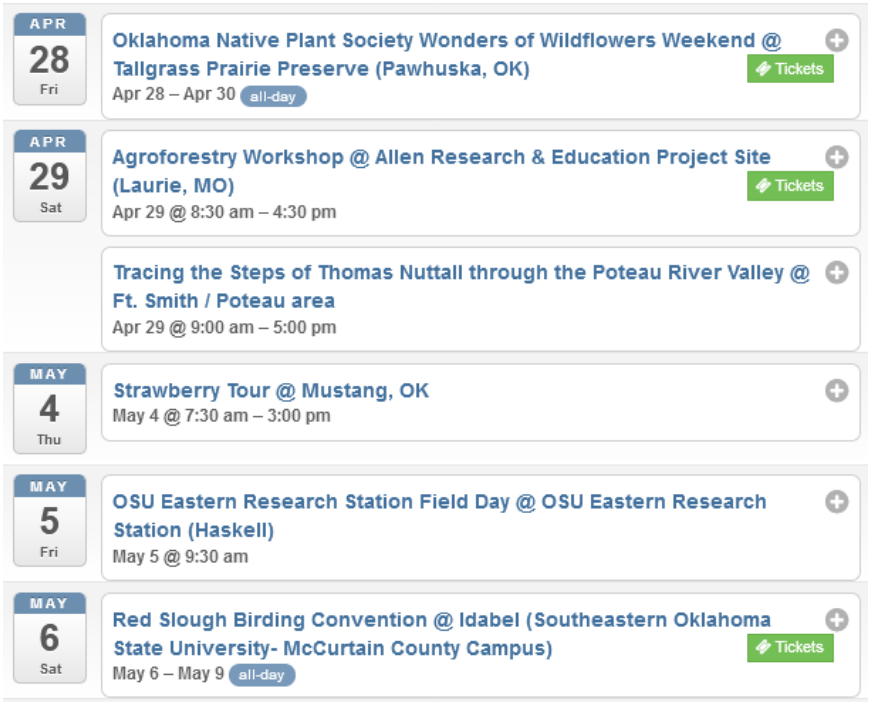
The Kerr Center's newly revised publication, "**Trees and Shrubs of Value to Pollinators**," describes the roles that taller, woodier members of the plant family can play in providing habitat for native pollinators.

Compiled by the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation, this report lists, **in table format, a variety of trees and shrubs that grow in Oklahoma**. For each, it gives **time of bloom, mature height, water requirements, and commercial sources**, as well as the **pollinators that visit the plant, whether it is a host or nest plant, and its value to other wildlife**.

The Kerr Center's online **native plant and pollinator library** contains many other resources for working with native pollinators and the plants they depend on. Give it a look!

Spring Events: Wildflowers, Agroforestry, Early Naturalist's Footsteps...

The end of April is popping with opportunities for fun and learning: the Oklahoma Native Plant Society's **Wonders of Wildflowers celebration is happening April 28 in Pawhuska**, and there's an **agroforestry workshop in Laurie, Missouri on April 29**. Also on the 29th, **a historical class/tour will trace early naturalist Thomas Nuttall's route through the Poteau River valley - including across the Kerr Ranch**.



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.

Support the Kerr Center

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! If you enjoy reading this newsletter or visiting our website, please consider making a gift to the Kerr Center today!

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