KERR CENTER

Field Notes

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Maura McDermott: pgs. 3, 6, 10, 11, 12 bottom
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To Preserve and Protect:
Farmland Preservation in Oklahoma

–Wylie Harris and Mary Penick

Throughout the United States, farmers and ranchers wage an uphill battle against the increasing size of cities and suburbs. This growth and expansion eats away at some of America's most valuable agricultural land, while driving land prices and taxes beyond the reach of most farmers and ranchers.

Oklahoma is not immune to this phenomenon (See sidebar, p. 22). While the Sooner State ranks lower in the amount of agricultural land lost to development than some surrounding states, it still places in the top half of states losing their farming and ranching capabilities to unfettered development.

The map of Oklahoma agricultural land loss (p. 22) shows where high quality (also known as prime) farmland is being lost to urban development. Farmland in or near the Oklahoma City and Tulsa metropolitan areas is in particular danger.

Protecting farmland maintains the necessary land base for growing a local food supply. However, farmland preservation also benefits local communities in many other ways, including lower costs of public services, increased tax revenues, improved flood control, and higher water and air quality.

Land Legacy

Land Legacy, a nonprofit land trust that works to preserve Oklahoma farmland, has put over 14,000 acres under conservation easements in 45 completed projects in 13 Oklahoma counties during its five years of existence.

A conservation easement is a legal agreement that lets landowners donate, or sell, the rights to develop their land. Land placed under an easement is protected from development in perpetuity.

"The good thing is that easements are a completely voluntary program," says Kerr Center President Jim Horne, who also serves on the Land Legacy board. "The government isn't telling you what to do, and the landowner has complete freedom of choice in setting up the terms of the easement to suit his or her wishes."

Such arrangements allow landowners to receive economic benefits from the rising value of their land. In addition to the proceeds from any development rights sold, these can include tax

Continued on page twenty-one

The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture offers progressive leadership and educational programs to all those interested in making farming and ranching environmentally friendly, socially equitable, and economically viable over the long term.

The Kerr Center is a non-profit foundation located on 4,000 acres near the southeastern Oklahoma town of Poteau. It was established in 1985.

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Saving Seeds: New Reports Out for Oklahoma Gardeners and Farmers

Gardeners are eagerly poring over this winter's crop of seed catalogs, but they'll find far fewer seeds to choose from now than just 25 years ago.

By one estimate, the number of commercially available garden seed varieties has fallen by 90% since 1981.

Older "heirloom" varieties, the ones grandpa used to grow, are disappearing from the lists.

"Historical value and novelty are not the only reasons to take an interest in heirloom varieties," says the Kerr Center's George Kuepper.

According to a new set of free publications from the Center, heirlooms offer much more than just antique accents for both home and commercial gardens.

The rich genetic heritage of heirlooms preserves traits that let them flourish in an age before widespread fertilizer, pesticides, and irrigation.

Another plus: since they are neither hybridized nor genetically engineered, anyone can save their seed to plant again in the next season.

Two of the new reports detail the results from the Kerr Center's heirloom variety trials.

Over the 2008 growing season, the Kerr Center tested 30 heirloom varieties of okra, and twenty (along with six newer varieties for comparison) of sweet sorghum.

Growing Heirloom Okra at the Kerr Center: A Preliminary Study rates okra varieties for yield, date of first harvest, plant height, ease of harvest, fruit type and color, and attractiveness as landscape plants. (See p. 3 for the full report.)

"Okra is one of the most popular and intriguing vegetables in the Mid-South United States," Kuepper writes. "It not only adds variety, taste and nutrition to Southern cuisine, it is one of the more reliable crops that farmers and gardeners can grow in this climate."

Results reported in *Growing Heirloom Sorghum at the Kerr Center: A Preliminary Study* include dates of seedling and head emergence, stalk height, and tillering.

"Some heirloom sorghums were much earlier than improved varieties we've customarily grown and processed at the Kerr Center," Kuepper observed.

The Kerr Center has grown sorghum for more than twenty years. During the annual Fall Farm Fest at the Overstreet-Kerr Historical Farm near Sallisaw, visitors watch the sorghum being pressed and "cooked" the old fashioned way.

The Center plans more variety trials in 2009.

The third new publication, *Heirloom Vegetables, Genetic Diversity, And the Pursuit of Food Security*, explains how the loss of heirloom varieties sacrifices both genetic diversity and public control of the food supply.

The report identifies opportunities that heirlooms offer both for market gardening and home food production.

It also reviews scientific evidence suggesting that heirloom varieties may be more nutritious than their more recent counterparts.

For more information call the Kerr Center at 918.647.9123 or visit www.kerrcenter.com. The site offers free downloads of these and many other publications on various topics in sustainable agriculture.

Growing Heirloom Okra at the Kerr Center

A Preliminary Study, November 2008

By George Kuepper, *Sustainable Agriculture Specialist*
with **Bruce Branscum** and **Simon Billy,** *Kerr Farm/Ranch Technicians*
and **Melanie Zoeller,** *Kerr Center Executive Administrative Assistant.*

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"I used to think a tropical depression was something you cured with a stiff rum and coke, and a walk on the beach. That was before Gustav rolled through Oklahoma in early September and put an end to the heirloom okra trial we'd planted in early June. That was unfortunate. We'd hoped to measure yield, height and other characteristics through the middle of September, at least. But even with this abrupt and untimely termination, we learned a lot about heirloom okra varieties and are pleased to share it with you." – GK

Introduction

Okra is one of the most popular and intriguing vegetables in the Mid-South United States. It not only adds variety, taste and nutrition to Southern cuisine, it is one of the more reliable crops that farmers and gardeners can grow in this climate.

Originating on the African continent, okra is typically heat- and drought-tolerant, with only a small number of serious diseases and insect pests.

What are Heirlooms and Why Bother with Heirloom Okra?

As a descriptor, heirloom tells us that something is probably old and handed down from previous generations. The word means roughly the same thing when we talk about heirloom crops and crop varieties; they are usually old cultivars, no longer in wide use by large-scale commercial growers. Some are truly hand-me-down selections nurtured by generations of family gardeners; others may be early releases from USDA or land grant university breeding programs that remain in use by gardeners and small farmers. One thing everyone agrees on is that all heirlooms are non-hybrid and not genetically-engineered, so that seed may be saved and re-planted. Still, one person's heirloom can easily be another's modern improved variety.

There are several reasons for Kerr Center's interest in heirloom okra varieties. Aside from the fact that they are a valuable genetic reservoir for plant breeders, many heirlooms still perform well in the field. In addition, they provide profitable production and marketing niches for growers. For example, they might be used to feed the growing consumer interest in heirloom vegetables and traditional foods.

If you grow okra, you probably know of four or five common varieties that can be found in local stores. You'll be surprised to hear that there are many more. Many of them are heirlooms—selected, developed, and saved by farmers, gar-

deners, scientists, and now-defunct seed companies.

We acquired 30 different heirloom varieties from four seed companies that specialize in traditional, non-hybrid, heirloom selections, to see how well they would do in southeastern Oklahoma.

The 2008 Kerr Center Trial

We established our heirloom okra trial at the Kerr Center Ranch, on a newly converted pasture that we are converting to organic production. The site features a loam soil with moderately poor drainage, 3.1% organic matter, and pH 6.5. Phosphorus and potassium levels were low and medium respectively.

We planted all 30 varieties on June 5th (somewhat late for southeastern Oklahoma) and side-dressed approximately 710 lbs./ac. of a 3-2-3 commercial organic fertilizer (equivalent in lbs./ac. of 21-14-21 for NPK, respectively) on June 17th. We also sprayed compost tea on July 18th. No herbicides or pesticides were used. Sprinkler irrigation was applied as needed.

We planted twenty-five-foot plots and did NOT replicate the plots. While lack of replication limited our ability to measure fine differences in performance among varieties, this was not our objective. We were merely hoping to get a general idea of how the heirlooms would perform and which ones seemed most promising… and not.

All varieties had excellent germination. They emerged quickly and evenly within 4–10 days of planting. We thinned plants to roughly 10 inches between plants, and managed very good weed control using hand and machine cultivation.

Details and Discussion

The table shows our findings. The varieties are listed in the order that they began producing harvestable pods. All thirty varieties eventually produced marketable fruit; most did so beginning the final week of July.

Our crew harvested every 2–3 days up to and including September 2nd. On that last day the remnants of Hurricane Gustav did enough damage to terminate the trial. Our yield assessment, therefore, is based on a shortened season. Okra, as most gardeners know, can produce up until the first frost if it is regularly harvested and gets adequate moisture.

Yield Level: Because our plots are not replicated, we only felt comfortable dividing the varieties into four groupings based on yield. Most varieties fell into the high and moderate yield categories. Moderate yielding varieties should not be immediately dismissed—they produced a respectable amount of fruit, just less than those in the high category. A few varieties were very high yielding and showed every indication of continuing to produce at high levels. Low yielding varieties were clearly not competitive during the harvest period and showed no hint of much improvement during the last week of harvest.

Plant Height: We measured plant heights

Heirloom Okra Variety Trial, 2008

Variety	First Harvestable Fruit	Yield Level	Plant Height 8/14/08	Easy To Harvest	Fruit Type	Fruit Color	Attractive Landscape Plant
Bowling Red	25-Jul	High	30 in.		Standard	Red-tinge	✔
Burgundy	25-Jul	Moderate	46 in.		Standard	Red	✔
Jade	25-Jul	V. High	32 in.		Standard	Green	
Thai	25-Jul	V. High	56 in.	✔	Standard	Green	
Evertender	26-Jul	V. High	38 in.	✔	Standard	Green	
James Hopper	26-Jul	Moderate	37 in.		Standard	Green	
Pentagreen	26-Jul	V. High	30 in.		Standard	Green	
Cajun Jewel	27-Jul	High	25 in.		Standard	Green	
Eagle Pass	27-Jul	High	44 in.		Fat	Green	
My Joanie	27-Jul	High	52 in.		Standard	Green	✔
Alabama Red	28-Jul	Moderate	40 in.		Standard	Green	✔
Louisiana Short	28-Jul	High	46 in.	✔	Fat	Green	
Emerald	29-Jul	High	42 in.		Standard	Green	
Red River	29-Jul	Low	62 in.	✔	Standard	Red	✔
Beck's Gardenville	30-Jul	Moderate	36 in.		Fat	Red-tinge	
Burmese	30-Jul	High	36 in.		Standard	Green	
Hill Country Heirloom Red	30-Jul	Moderate	48 in.		Fat	Green	✔
Jimmy T's	30-Jul	Moderate	37 in.		Standard	Green	
Milsap White	30-Jul	Low	34 in.		Standard	Green	
Perkins Long Pod	30-Jul	Moderate	47 in.		Standard	Green	
Star of David	30-Jul	Moderate	56 in.		Fat	Green	
Stubby	30-Jul	High	44 in.	✔	Fat	Green	
Fife Creek Cowhorn	1-Aug	Moderate	48 in.		Standard	Green	
Clemson Spineless	4-Aug	Moderate	44 in.		Standard	Green	
Cowhorn	4-Aug	High	42 in.		Standard	Green	
Guarijio	6-Aug	Moderate	45 in.		Fat	Green	
Texas Hill Country Red	6-Aug	Moderate	45 in.		Fat	Green	✔
Mammoth	6-Aug	Low	57 in.		Fat	Green	
Stewart's ZeeBest	12-Aug	Low	41 in.		Standard	Green	
African	22-Aug	Low	23 in.		Standard	Red-tinge	✔

when all but one of the varieties was producing fruit. The one variety not in production—'African'—began yielding fruit about one week after we took these measurements. As we approached September 2nd—our last harvest date—a few varieties were already so tall that harvest was becoming inconvenient. Had we continued our harvesting, it would have become problematic within another one or two weeks—a definite disadvantage for commercial producers intent on a long market season. And as might be expected, the taller varieties lodged more readily when Gustav's heavy winds hit them.

Ease of Harvest: This can make a big difference for growers who don't want to waste precious time searching through dense vegetation for pods that are hard to see, only to find them several days later when they are too large to sell. We based ease of harvest on a combination of factors including plant height, foliage density, fruit color contrast, and side branching.

Mid-sized plants, with long internodes and less-dense foliage, were much easier to harvest. Varieties with fewer side branches have most of the fruit on the main stem and are also easier to harvest.

Seed Sources:

VARIETIES:

African, Evertender, James Hopper, Louisiana Short, Mammoth, My Joanie, Pentagreen, Red River, Stubby
from:
Sand Hill Preservation Center
1878 230th Street
Calamus, IA 52729
563.246.2299
www.sandhillpreservation.com

VARIETIES:

Beck's Gardenville, Eagle Pass, Guarijio, Texas Hill Country Red
from:
Native Seeds/SEARCH
526 N. Fourth Avenue
Tucson, AZ 85705
520.622.5561
www.nativeseeds.org

VARIETIES:

Cajun Jewel, Cow Horn, Jade
from:
Southern Exposure Seed Exchange
P.O. Box 460
Mineral, VA 23117
540.894.9480
www.southernexposure.com

VARIETIES:

Alabama Red, Bowling Red, Burgundy, Burmese, Clemson Spineless, Emerald, Fife Creek Cow Horn, Hill Country Heirloom Red, Jimmy T's, Milsap White, Perkins Long Pod, Star of David, Stewart Zee-Best, Thai
from:
Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds
2278 Baker Creek Road
Mansfield, MO 65704
417.924.8917
www.rareseeds.com

Edited by Wylie Harris and Maura McDermott.

'Evertender' was certainly the easiest. The Southern Exposure Seed Exchange catalog describes it as "unbranched." While this was not true in every case, it was largely so. The pods were extraordinarily easy to find and collect.

Fruit Type & Color: While there are many fine differences among varieties, we observed two main shapes for okra pods—one being the standard, narrow tapered fruit most gardeners are used to, and a much shorter, fatter type of pod. Each variety is clearly of one type or the other. We saw no varieties that were of an intermediate shape.

If you plan to sell okra to a particular market, it would be wise to determine whether your customers prefer a certain pod type. The same is true of pod color. Several varieties produced red or red-tinged pods, which are certainly attractive and novel, though market demand might be limited.

Attractiveness as Landscape Plants: While it is not common to think of vegetables as landscape plants, several okra varieties were quite beautiful and decorative. In all instances, the varieties we noted as decorative featured various shades of red stems and red-tinged leaves and fruit. One variety—'Bowling Red'—had leaves similar in color to red cabbage.

Pest and Disease Tolerance: Throughout the season, we also attempted to rate these varieties on insect pest and disease tolerance. This proved something of a wasted effort. While there was some insect leaf feeding early in the season, it was never problematic and there were not clear differences among varieties. As the season progressed, no insect pest problems were evident at all. Similarly, none of the okra varieties exhibited any plant diseases.

In the Future…

Ours was only a preliminary study. We plan to evaluate more heirloom okra varieties in the coming years. We've already identified some we'd overlooked this past season. If fortunate, we may be able to compare nutrition and taste, also.

We certainly encourage you to try these and other okra varieties yourself. Your experiences might be quite different and we'd like to hear if they are.

The okra trial was a project of the Kerr Center's School of Sustainability. For more information on the School of Sustainability and internships, see page 20.

Local Foods **News**

Farmers' Market Growers: Sign up Now to Accept WIC Vouchers in 2009

– Doug Walton

Local foods continue to make great strides in Oklahoma, gaining ever greater acceptance both in private markets and in federal food aid programs.

Beginning this summer, fruit and vegetable growers selling at farmers' markets in Oklahoma will have an important new group of customers. The USDA Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children, known as the WIC Program, has expanded its list of eligible food products to include fruits and vegetables.

Starting this August, participating low-income pregnant women, new mothers, and their children will be allowed and encouraged to purchase fruits and vegetables using the special paper WIC vouchers they'll receive each month.

In the past, WIC benefits have not been provided for fruits and veggies, but rather have been limited to cereals, dairy products, eggs, beans, juice, and infant formula. But this all changed with the historic rewriting of the regulations governing WIC food packages late in 2007. The changes reflect the dietary and nutritional needs of this at-risk population, in accordance with recommendations from the National Academies' Institute of Medicine.

Furthermore, each state now has the option to allow farmers at farmers' markets (as well as participating grocery stores and supermarkets) to accept the new WIC fruit and vegetable vouchers. In Oklahoma, staff from the Kerr Center and the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture met with WIC Program leaders at the Oklahoma State Department of Health to explore options for including farmers' markets as approved sites.

As a result of these meetings, Oklahoma farmers selling fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets can now be approved to accept the new WIC fruit and vegetable vouchers in 2009. Here's how it will work:

Each of the approximately 100,000 participating women, infants and children in Oklahoma will receive a $6, $8 or $10 paper voucher each month for purchasing fruits and vegetables. They can choose canned, frozen or fresh items from any of over 500 approved retailers, and they can also choose fresh produce from any approved farmers at registered farmers' markets in the state.

Approved farmers accept the vouchers, stamp them with their assigned numbers, and deposit them in their bank accounts just like personal checks. That's it!

Here's how farmers can get approved:

1. Be part of a registered farmers' market in OK. Check www.okgrown.com/markets for a current list of registered markets, or call Justin Whitmore at the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, 405.522.6194.
2. Visit the WIC Vendor website at www.ok.gov/wic/Vendor_Management/Farmers_Market
   OR call 1.888.655.2942, x14765 to request a farmers' market packet.
2. Review the Vendor Handbook and Sample WIC Farmers Agreement.
3. Complete and return the Farmers Application Form.
4. Once approved, each farmer will be sent a Farmers Agreement and an order form for a stamp.
5. Approved farmers will also be required to attend a one-hour training session, to be scheduled later this winter and spring at various locations and dates around the state.

The more growers who become approved, the easier it will be for the WIC Program and County Health Departments to promote farmers' markets and to connect their clientele with nearby markets.

For more information about the WIC Farmers' Market Program, call the WIC Vendor office at the phone number above. Or contact Justin Whitmore at the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, 405.522.6194, or Doug Walton with the Kerr Center, 918.686.6939.

To learn more about the role of local foods in food assistance programs and community food security, check out *Closer to Home: Healthier Food, Farms, and Families inOklahoma*, available free online at www.kerrcenter.com/publications/closer_to_home.

2008 Essay Contest Winners

Four winning essays from a pool of over 200 entries statewide crowned the 2008 Kerr Center Essay Contest. The contest, open to high school juniors and seniors, is designed to include young people in a thoughtful discussion of contemporary food and agricultural issues.

The subject of the 2008 contest was "The Value of Locally Grown Foods," chosen because of the rapidly growing interest in locally grown foods in Oklahoma.

The complete text of winning essays is available online at www.kerrcenter.com/essay_contest/2008_essay.htm.

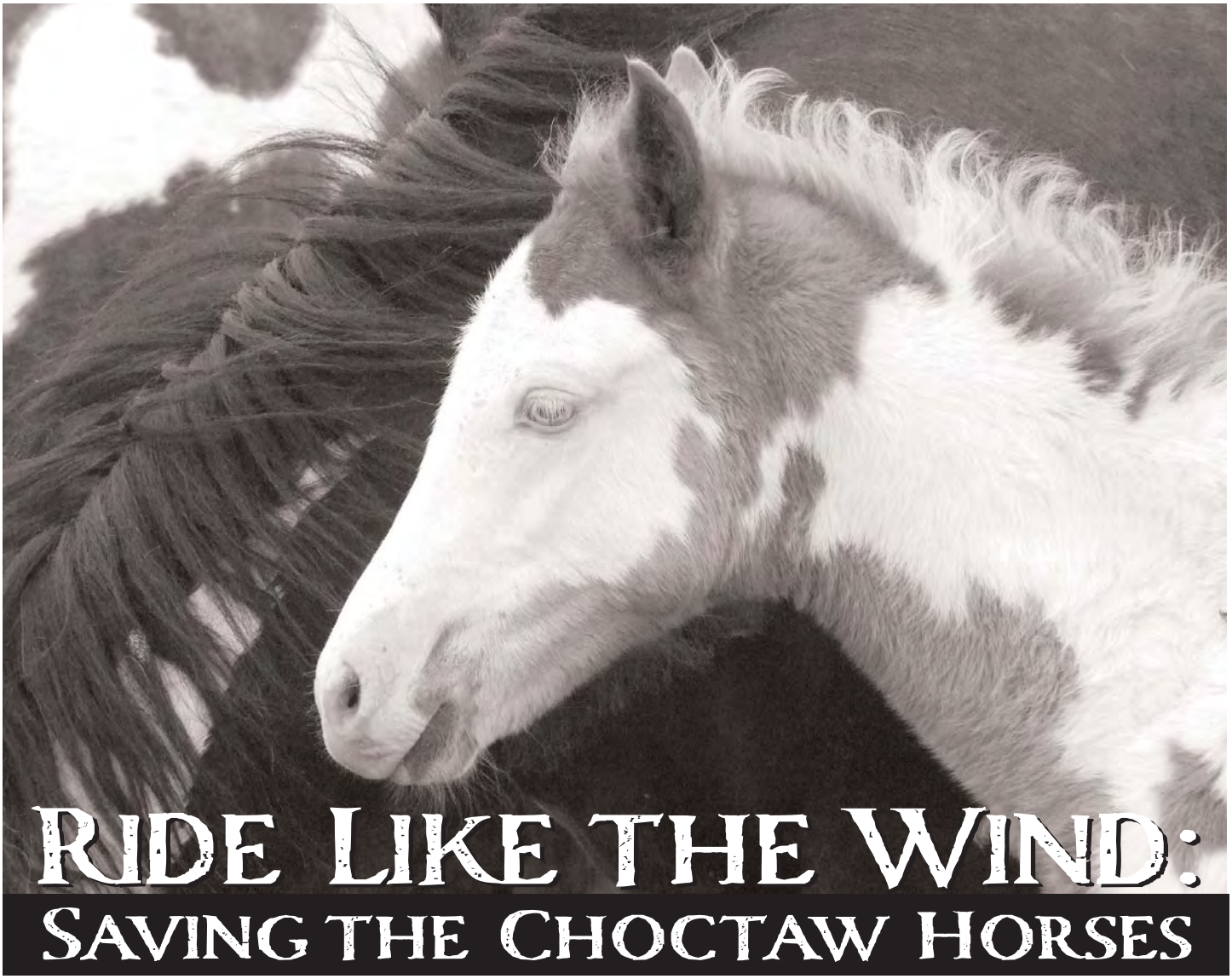
1ST PLACE ($750.00):
Mallory Irwinsky, Piedmont High School, 11th grade: "Locally Grown Foods: From Farm To Table"

2ND PLACE ($500.00):
Jake McClure, Lawton High School, 11th grade: "Local Power"

HONORABLE MENTIONS ($250.00 each):

Jake Boren,Waurika High School, 11th grade: "The Impact of Locally Grown Food"

Felisha Yoder, Thomas High School, 12th grade: "The Value of Locally Grown Foods"



Ride Like the Wind: Saving the Choctaw Horses

–Maura McDermott

Half a millennium ago, men from Spain came ashore in a new, vast, strange land. These men in steel armor brought with them guns and germs.

And horses.

The Spanish horses were the best in the world at the time, a mix of Barb, Arabian and Andalusian blood. They were sure-footed and tough, able to carry heavy loads across mountains and deserts. They could run if given the chance. They were loyal and big-hearted, gentle and smart.

On these horses, Cortés, Coronado, DeSoto and others explored the new world and conquered the native peoples they encountered.

Since horses had been extinct in North America for 10,000 years, Native Americans had never encountered them. The sight was both awe inspiring and terrifying. People on foot were no match for these men on horses.

After the Spanish established colonies, they prohibited native peoples from owning, even riding, horses.

The story might have ended there, but for the horses.

Many escaped into the wild where Indians found them and tamed them. When the Southwest Pueblo tribes revolted in 1680 they seized the Spaniards' horses, sheep and cattle and began trading them to other tribes.

Before long, the Spanish horse became the Indians' greatest ally and friend.

As tribes adopted what is now known as the Spanish Colonial horse, they made it their own, developing unique "strains" of the basic breed.

On their fast "ponies," the buffalo-hunting tribes became Lords of the Plains. The ecology and economy of the Great Plains was transformed. Even agrarian tribes far to the east, like Choctaws and Cherokees, acquired horses and began to use them for transportation and as pack animals.

The long journey of the Spanish Colonial horse into the heart of Native America had begun.

That journey has taken this horse into battle against Custer and down the Trail of Tears into Oklahoma, with its 40 recognized tribes and almost half a million people who identify themselves as Native Americans.

In this state that was once Indian Territory, this historic horse is facing a new challenge: surviving in the modern world.

Why does this matter? They are a direct remnant of the horses of the Golden Age of Spanish horse breeding, a type that is largely gone from Spain as well as America. Besides being an important part of American history, says the ALBC, their genes are "irreplaceable."

Genes from a Golden Age

According to the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC), for centuries Spanish horses were the most common type of horse throughout the Southeast and regions west of the Mississippi.

But in the mid-late 1800s, almost all Spanish stocks were crossbred with or replaced by horses of larger size including thoroughbreds, other riding horse breeds and draft horses. Ubiquitous in 1750 and 1850, the pure Spanish Colonial horse in North American was almost extinct by 1950.

A few herds of pure blood remained in the Southeast and the Southwest owned by traditional ranchers or Native American tribes, and a few were found in isolated feral herds. The remaining population of these horses included many distinct strains.

Today, the horses are known by a number of names including Spanish Mustang, Spanish Barb or by their strain name, such as Choctaw or Comanche. All together, the breed population numbers over 2000, and each year various associations register more than 200 horses.

This is a small number, and the ALBC considers the Spanish Colonial horse a threatened species.

Some strains of the horse are in even greater jeopardy, the group says. Fewer than 200 horses of the Choctaw and Cherokee strains remain.

Why does this matter? They are a direct remnant of the horses of the Golden Age of Spanish horse breeding, a type that is largely gone from Spain as well as America. Besides being an important part of American history, says the ALBC, their genes are "irreplaceable."

The Spanish Colonial horse has many positive characteristics, say those who own them. They can be used for ranch work, pleasure riding and endurance competitions. They are surefooted, have an unusually long stride, and many of them are gaited. They are known for being people oriented with gentle natures and calm temperaments.

Above all, they are tough—survivors.

All in the Family

Monique Sheaffer is a horsewoman and a Choctaw. So it is fitting that this great granddaughter of Principal Chief Gilbert Wesley (G.W.) Dukes is part of the small group that is working to save the Choctaw strain of the Spanish Colonial horse from disappearing.

Quite a lot is known about the history of the Choctaw horse. ALBC technical advisor Phillip Sponenberg, DVM, has researched and written extensively about both the Choctaw and Cherokee strains of the Spanish Colonial horse. According to Sponenberg,

Both the Choctaw and Cherokee tribes were avid horse breeders in their original territories within the southeastern United States. The horses they bred were Spanish and were obtained at first from the chain of missions across the Deep South and west of the Mississippi in early Spanish colonial days.

Mozelle Henry and Allen Dukes at the Overstreet-Kerr Historical Farm

and other colors.

Choctaw horses are occasionally gaited and are notably quick. Choctaw breeder Hal Brame was well known for taking his favorite little paint horse to parties and dances and making wagers with other horse owners on races over 50 yards. In his lifetime Hal took a lot of money from the owners of quarter horses and thoroughbreds who subsequently went away with increased respect for small Indian horses!

Last summer, Monique and her family purchased a small herd of three pregnant mares (Angel, Goblin and Pearl) and two yearling fillies (Cricket and Kashi) from the Overstreet-Kerr Historical Farm and moved them to their new farm in Pennsylvania.

Monique first learned about Choctaw horses online after her brother sent her a web link to Red Road Farm in Vermont, where they have a Choctaw horse conservation program.

As the tribes became adept in horse breeding, the quality of the tribal horses gained a good reputation and was specifically mentioned as being excellent in various historic travel journals.

Following the government removal in the mid-1800's of the Choctaw and Cherokee tribes from the southeast to what is now Oklahoma, the tribes continued to breed their horses. The basis for the Oklahoma herds was horses brought from the southeast on the "Trail of Tears," but no doubt some western horses were added as well.

Individual families, he says, played an important role in preserving the tribal horses. Among the Cherokee, horses belonging to the Whitmire and Corntassle families can be traced back to at least to 1835, and perhaps as far back as 1775. He writes:

The major families that preserved the Choctaw horses until recently were the Brame, Crisp, Locke, Self, Helms, Thurman, and Carter families. Their horses were run on the open range in areas where other types of horses were not kept.

These families had hundreds of horses of consistent Spanish type with widely varying colors including the "Spanish roan" sabino type, leopard and blanketed patterns,

> "I think it was the light in my mom's voice/face when we would talk about the horses that really got the idea in my head to be part of the effort... It was like some long ago light was turned back on for her."

Mozelle Henry feeding Pearl, a Choctaw mare

After much family consultation they decided to take on a breeding herd. Then they began "frantically" looking for a bigger farm to buy, with room to add horses.

"Knowing these horses carried my people from Mississippi/Alabama (traditional homeland of the Choctaw people) on the Trail of Tears to then Indian Territory is very special," she says.

She views the relationship between the Choctaws and their horses as a "partnership," one that helped the Choctaws survive and prosper.

Monique's mother, Mozelle Henry and her uncle, Allen Dukes, came to the historical farm to meet the horses in June. The siblings grew up riding Indian ponies in the Choctaw nation in southeast Oklahoma.

Mozelle worked for the BIA until she retired and lives in Virginia, where Monique grew up. Her daughter loved to ride during summer trips back to Oklahoma, she recalls.

"I think it was the light in my mom's voice/face when we would talk about the horses that really got the idea in my head to be part of the effort," says Monique. "It was like some long ago light was turned back on for her."

Saving the Horses

In the mid-90s the Overstreet-Kerr Historical Farm had first begun working with endangered livestock breeds. The Overstreet farm, located about ten miles south of present-day Sallisaw, Oklahoma, was established in 1871 in what was then Indian Territory, and within the Choctaw nation. Tom Overstreet was a Missourian, but his wife Margaret Victor was a Choctaw woman.

About twenty years ago, the Kerr Center stepped in to save the historic Overstreet home and farm. The center restored the house to its former elegance

For more information

Portions of this article were taken from the website of the

American Livestock Breeds Conservancy
PO Box 477
Pittsboro, NC 27312
919.542.5704
albc@albc-usa.org
www.albc-usa.org

Founded in 1977, the ALBC works with members to save endangered breeds of livestock and poultry, providing research, tech support and education.

Southwest Spanish Mustang Association
Bryant Rickman
580.743.1991
rickmandarlene@yahoo.com
or sistymonroe@aol.com
www.southwestspanish mustangassociation.com

This site includes a sale barn, extensive information on the breed and Gilbert Jones' memoir.

Overstreet-Kerr Historical Farm
Jim Combs
29186 Overstreet Kerr Rd.
Keota, OK 74941
www.kerrcenter.com
918.966.3396
okhfarm@crosstel.net

Red Road Farm
PO Box 21
Morrisville, VT 0566
802-888-6623
email: Vtblackpony@aol.com
www.red-road-farm.com
www.colonialspanishpony.com

Red Road Farm has a Choctaw horse breeding program and a horse "sponsorship" program.

Goblin, Minti and Cricket have found a home on the Sheaffer farm

and opened the farm to the public for educational tours and events.

Jim Combs, longtime manager of the farm, wanted livestock that the Choctaw themselves had in the late 1800s. After consulting with Dr. Sponenberg, the center established a herd of Pinewoods cattle at the historical farm. The breed is native to Mississippi, and are typical of the livestock the Choctaws and others kept both before and after removal to Oklahoma.

In 2002 the farm acquired three Choctaw mares and a stud and began a conservation breeding program.

One goal of the program was to preserve the "nearly lost, survival of the fittest" genetics of this rare breed, says Combs. For about five years the farm sold breeding stock as well as pleasure mounts to people around the country.

Combs remains a big fan of this loyal little horse. "These horses have survived for over 500 years with little need for intervention by man to survive and reproduce," he says.

Another goal of the program was to educate the public about rare breeds of livestock and poultry.

"We are rediscovering how they [rare breeds] might fit today, says Kerr Center president Jim Horne, who thinks that possible niches need to be explored. Both he and Combs have an active interest in rare breeds and have served on the ALBC Board of Directors. Currently, the center is focusing its breeding efforts on the Pineywoods cattle. Expanding the cattle herd left little room for the horses.

Pearl's foal, born at the Overstreet-Kerr Farm

"The Choctaw horses are real versatile, manageable and excellent as family horses," says Horne.

Sheaffer says her son Matt has claimed Joey, Angel's foal, as his own. He will grow into a nice trail horse, she says.

The Sheaffers are building their preservation program at their Windrider Farm with the Kerr Center mares and a stud, Windrider's Runner, that they got from the last remaining large herd of Choctaw and Cherokee horses in existence: the Blackjack Mountain horses.

Ride Like the Wind

In 1916, a boy fell in love with a mare that was as fast as the wind.

The wind seldom stops blowing on the high plains of Oklahoma and Texas. The boy's little horse, Susie, an Indian Territory mustang, was descended from a Comanche Indian pony stallion that was "fast, and had stamina to hold it for miles."

The boy's name was Gilbert Jones. He grew up listening to his father tell of the days when the Comanche still rode their "fancy fleet pinto ponies on raids into Texas." One story his father told "kindled my desire in later years to own a colorful mustang band."

He told of seeing...about fifty Indian boys, eight to fourteen years old, riding their ponies of every color from the top of a hill to Cache Creek about half a mile away. They would ride single file at full speed up the creek bank and dive their ponies into a deep hole of water. Their ponies would run off a short distance and start grazing, waiting for their riders to return. No doubt these boys looked forward to someday being buffalo hunters and warriors.

Mystic Coyote, one of the horses rescued by the ALBC.

But the times were changing. The Comanche's freedom, he writes, "was nearing an end, as their source of food, the buffalo was practically killed out. The government was turning the land over to the white man and determined that the Indians would become reservation farmers. The army had already slaughtered thousands of their ponies, which the Indians prized above everything else."

The Jones family moved often around the Texas panhandle and into New Mexico. "My father taught me very young to ride, swim, shoot guns and drive teams…These were the essentials of life for boys in that day and time," he recalls.

Gilbert grew up and married, and until his death in 2001, he bred the best purebred Spanish mustangs he could find, searching far and wide for exceptional horses.

In his "History of Medicine Springs Mustangs," he tells of the blizzards, drought, sand storms, bad water, killer lightening storms and poisonous loco weed that his horses had to contend with.

In 1958 Gilbert Jones moved with his family and 25 of his Spanish mustangs to a more hospitable environment, Medicine Springs, in Pushmataha County in southeast Oklahoma, "ten miles back in the Kiamichi Mountains with one and a half million acres of timber company open range to graze by permits."

He quickly became acquainted with several very old men, who had at one time run several hundred Choctaw ponies on the open range.

Realizing that the once numerous horses were quickly disappearing, Jones began the collection of as many Choctaw and Cherokee horses as he could find and assembled the largest known herd of these purebred animals.

He also crossbred the Choctaw and Cherokee horses with the Spanish mustangs he brought with

him. The resulting herd was comprised of bloodlines that originated from Choctaw, Cherokee, Huasteca, Kiowa, Comanche, and other Native American tribes along with Colonial Spanish Horses from Utah and New Mexico (see sidebar). He established the Southwest Spanish Mustang Registry and kept extensive records of his work.

His horses became known for their ability in long endurance rides, such as the one pictured in the 2004 movie *Hidalgo*. In fact, a Jones' horse, itself descended from the herd that produced *Hidalgo*, played the famous mustang.

The film is based on the story of a half-Lakota cowboy named Frank Hopkins who in 1890 rides his Spanish mustang in the Ocean of Fire, a 3,000 mile survival race in the Arabian desert, besting the finest, purebred Arabian horses of the Arab sheiks.

Hopkins had complete faith in his horse, saying "You can't beat mustang intelligence in the entire equine race. These animals have had to shift for themselves for generations. They had to work out their own destiny or be destroyed. Those that survived were animals of superior intelligence."

Honoring Our Heritage

Following Jones' death, his herd of 300 Spanish mustangs was inherited by close friends Bryant and Darlene Rickman.

Rickman, an experienced horseman and trainer, with a real feel for these horses, continued to breed them in the same tradition that Gilbert followed. Many continued to run free in the Kiamichi Mountains.

But times changed, yet again. In 2007 the lease was terminated and the future of the horses was again in jeopardy.

Rickman, with help from family and friends, was faced with the daunting task of coaxing the horses into catch pens, and safely removing them to his ranch near Antlers. Once there, the horses had to be fed and cared for until they could be sold.

The whole situation was complicated by the fact that these were not just any horses—these were of exceedingly rare bloodlines— a treasure trove of genetics.

Enter the ALBC. In spring of 2008, the organization sent staff members Marjorie Bender and Jeannette Beranger to Oklahoma to participate in the "Blackjack Mountain Rescue."

ALBC Board member Jamie McConnell and his wife, Mary, who are new Choctaw and Cherokee breeders, also participated.

The challenges were enormous: to identify each animal for its genetic importance to the herd; to feed and health test the entire herd; and to promote and sell more than 150 of these horses in such a way that valuable breeding animals were placed with stewards who were committed to their conservation.

ALBC's technical advisor, Phil Sponenberg, who has been working on the conservation of this herd for about 30 years, identified the animals of greatest genetic importance and recommended a breeding plan that would ensure genetic diversity is not lost.

Since then, 200 horses have been placed, with the Rickmans keeping breeding herds of each the strains of Choctaw, Cherokee, Huasteca and Jones horses (see p.15).

Breeding herds have also been placed with new "stewards," individuals in Oklahoma and around the U.S., like Monique Sheaffer, who are committed to the long-term survival of the strains.

Despite this progress, these rare horses are not out of the proverbial woods yet. Rickman says he has 150 or more horses, including two-year-olds and 2008 foals in urgent need of homes.

More horses remain in the mountains and the Rickmans are continuing to capture and remove them as they are found.

While he still has some purebred Choctaws for sale, many more are of the Jones strain (see sidebar).

And though he has breeding groups still available, he emphasizes that people do not have to commit to a being a conservation breeder to buy his horses. The rarest bloodlines have been placed in conservation breeding programs and according to the ALBC, are "secured."

Rickman has sent horses all over the world. Recently a German woman, after watching the movie *Hidalgo*, was moved to find the Jones/Rickman horses. She eventually traveled to Oklahoma and bought a Choctaw horse. It cost her $4000 to get the horse over to Germany, says Rickman.

His horses continue to beat all-Arabians in endurance races, he says proudly.

Meanwhile, in Pennsylvania, the Sheaffers and their horses are settling into their new home. Their horses are "getting friendlier by the day," says Monique Sheaffer.

She keeps in close contact with other breeders and is making plans to promote the virtues of the Choctaw horse by attending farm and horse events.

"We consider it a privilege to own and work with these unique horses," she says, "and to honor our heritage in so doing."

The Rickman Herd

—taken from "Blackjack Mountain Hose Rescue Fact Sheet" online at www.albc-usa.org/ChoctawRescue/crChoctawrescuefactsheet.html

Bryant Rickman with his Choctaw horse SS

The conservation breeding plan developed by ALBC Technical Advisor, Dr. Phil Sponenberg, subdivides the Rickman herd of Spanish Colonial Horses into two main breeding populations or lines within the herd.

Jones line: These are horses from Gilbert Jones breeding. They are from a foundation of North Texas, New Mexico, and Utah horses, to which has been added a good deal of Choctaw or Huasteca breeding. These horses usually excel at endurance, and can be tough competitors, with tough competitive minds.

Choctaw line: Choctaw horses are the most endangered and in need of conservation.

They are a Southeastern strain that was bred by the Choctaw Indians and traveled with the people on the Trail of Tears. All of these horses are highly people oriented and are subdivided into four subgroups including:

1. **Pure Choctaw** - These horses are known for durability and kind nature, as well as flashy colors. Approximately ten percent are gaited, but even the trotters have smooth gaits.
2. **Cherokee lineage** – These are Choctaw with significant Cherokee influence. They number about 40 head (estimate). They tend to be flashy paints, and many are strongly gaited.
3. **Huasteca lineage** - These are important because the Choctaw portion in this group is otherwise unrepresented in the Pure Choctaw group. That is, they are essential to the Choctaw conservation program. These tend to be durable and kind horses as well.
4. **"Mixed" Group** made up of a combination of the above mentioned Southeast Oklahoma strains.

2008 Meat Goat Forage Buck Test Results

For 102 days last summer and fall, 55 goat bucks competed to see which could gain weight fastest, with the least trouble from parasites, on 35 acres of pasture at the Kerr Ranch outside Poteau.

The bucks came from 21 farms in 8 different states.

Overall, the bucks gained an average of 0.07 pounds per day of the test; champions gained weight more than twice as fast.

The scoring system used to rank the bucks also included measures of parasite resistance, including fecal egg counts and FAMACHA scores.

GRAND CHAMPION
Breed: Kiko
Average Daily Gain: 0.19 lb.
Owner: Craig Adams, Illinois

RESERVE GRAND CHAMPION
Breed: Kiko
Average Daily Gain: 0.16 lb.
Owner: Fred Elder, Tennessee

THIRD PLACE
Breed: Kiko
Average Daily Gain: 0.15 lb.
Owner: Linda Sparks, Oklahoma

TOP HERDSMAN BY AVERAGE DAILY GAIN
Craig Adams, Illinois (0.13 lbs./day)

TOP HERDSMAN BY FECAL EGG COUNT
Richard Mayer, Kentucky
(1,883 eggs)

For more detailed information about the 2008 buck test results, and updates on the 2009 test, visit osukerrbucktest.typepad.com.

2009 Meat Goat Forage Performance Test

With the continuing popularity of its meat goat forage buck test (see sidebar), the Kerr Center is teaming up again with the OSU Cooperative Extension Service to conduct the 2009 Meat Goat Forage Performance Test.

"Last year was a great success, and we are looking forward to another," said test manager Mary Penick, livestock specialist at the Kerr Center.

Meat goats are booming in Oklahoma agriculture, and it's important to know which lines perform best on pasture. The forage performance test helps answer that question.

"The rationale behind the Oklahoma Meat Goat Forage Performance Test is to begin to identify individual bucks, as well as their sires and dams, that carry genetics expressing strong traits important in commercial meat goat production," said Penick

"Additionally, this test will allow breeders to compare genetics within their herd to make better management decisions as to herd lines that will produce profitable progeny for future herds. This test will also provide valuable information for all goat producers and the public."

Goat producers wishing to test their bucks' performance on forage are invited to enter bucks in the test, which will run from mid-July until the end of October.

Fee is $120 per buck, and nominations are due by June 15, 2009.

For details, nomination forms, and questions, visit the Kerr Center website at www.kerrcenter.com, or contact:
Mary Penick, 918.647.9123
Fax: 918.647.8712
E-mail: mpenick@kerrcenter.com

2008 Buck Test winner - Nitro

Meat Goat Program Updates

Later this year, the Kerr Center will publish a report containing detailed results of the first two years (2007 and 2008) of the meat goat forage performance test.

The Kerr Center has also added a commercial doe operation to educate and inform producers of sustainable meat goat management. Penick uses FAMACHA testing and fecal egg counts to monitor parasite loads, while also demonstrating grazing techniques for goat management.

In summer 2008, the does were moved to an 8-acre plot named "Native Grass Plot" to monitor how forages change in response to the does' grazing behavior. Using transects and photo monitoring, we can see the plant species change over time and the effect this has on the goats.

NEWS BRIEFS

Farm Bill Support for Local and Sustainable Agriculture

Farm to School Programs Free to Choose Local Food

With the passage of the 2008 Farm Bill, schools can now use a local preference in food purchasing. Specifically, "The Secretary shall allow schools to use a geographic preference for the procurement of unprocessed agricultural products, both locally grown and locally raised."

The 2008 Farm Bill also requires the Secretary to encourage schools to purchase unprocessed agricultural products – items requiring some handling and preparation, such as, washed vegetables, bagged greens, butchered livestock and poultry, pasteurized milk, and eggs – "to the maximum extent practicable and appropriate."

Source: The National Farm to School Network

Other Farm Bill Changes Benefiting Local Foods:

■ The **Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program** was expanded to all states to provide at least $100,000 in funding for schools to provide additional fresh fruits and vegetables as a daily snack.

■ The **Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations** provision allows (but does not mandate) the creation of a "traditionally and locally-grown food fund" where 50% of the food provided through the FDPIR program should be produced by Native Americans.

■ Funding for the **Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program** was increased to $20.6 million annually, to provide vouchers for low-income seniors to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets, CSA's, roadside stands and other direct marketing venues.

■ Funding for the **Farmers' Market Promotion Program** was increased to $33 million over five years which will go into one-year, competitively awarded grants of up to $75,000 to promote farmers' markets. $5 million will be available in the next fiscal year.

■ **Specialty Crop Block Grant** funding was increased to $224 million over five years. Each state's Department of Agriculture receives a minimum of $100,000, plus an additional amount according to its portion of specialty crop production, to spend at is discretion. Some eligible uses include "buy local" marketing campaigns, cooperative formation and development, and improvement of distribution systems.

Sources: Farm to Table; New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council

Farm Bill Expands Conservation Stewardship Program

The 2008 Farm Bill expands the Conservation Security Program, the nation's largest working-lands conservation program, and changes its name to the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

Farmers contract with the CSP to receive payments for implementing practices that maintain and improve healthy soil, clean water, and habitat for wildlife. Contracts pay a maximum of $200,000 over their five-year term.

Since its first passage in 2004, the CSP has enrolled 16 million acres. The new law provides $12 billion dollars to enroll 115 million acres by 2017.

Key changes include opening the program to all farms nationwide, rather than just those in selected watersheds, and shifting to a continuous signup process similar to that of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

Source: Land Stewardship Project

Other Farm Bill Changes Benefiting Sustainable Farming

■ The **Organic Research and Extension Initiative** received $18 million in mandatory funding for fiscal year 2009, to pay for projects that help farmers grow and market organic products. However, the Senate's and the Administration's proposed budgets cut this amount by $2 million and $10 million, respectively; the ultimate amount will not be known until February or March of 2009.

■ The **National Organic Certification Cost Share Program** was reauthorized, with almost five times more mandatory funding. This provision will make $22 million available through 2012 to help to help producers and handlers pay for up to 75% of their organic certification costs, with a maximum payment of $750 per operation per year.

■ **Organic Production and Transition Assistance** is now available nationwide as an option with the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Farms converting to organic production or expanding their existing organic production can receive up to 75% financial assistance (90% for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers), up to $20,000 per year per farm, with no more than $80,000 to be paid during any 6-year period. Additional technical assistance beyond these payment limits is also possible. Farms receiving support for organic farming from EQIP are ineligible for the certification cost-share program, and vice-versa.

■ The new Farm Bill explicitly recognizes organic farming as a conservation system, and sets up a **"crosswalk" between the National Organic Program and NRCS** to simplify the application process to these programs.

■ The **Organic Data Initiative** received $5 million in mandatory funding, to be divided between USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service, Economic Research Service, and National Agricultural Statistics Survey, to collect information about organic farms, acreage, and crop prices.

■ The Risk Management Agency is now required to contract for studies aimed at making **crop insurance** premiums and payouts for organic farmers more consistent with those offered to conventional farmers.

■ The new **Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program** does include new organic farmers among those eligible for a share of its $75 million in mandatory funding.

Sources: Organic Farming Research Foundation, Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

Seeds for Success:

Cattle Grazing Conference at Wilburton May 22-23

Further Information

To learn more about the "Seeds for Success" speakers and host institution, consult the following online resources:

Eastern Oklahoma State College, Agriculture Division
www.eosc.edu/academic/ag_div/farm/cattle_grazing_conference.html

Detailed conference schedule and info on places to stay in Wilburton online.

Donnell Brown/ R.A. Brown Ranch
www.rabrownranch.com

Greg Judy/ Green Pastures Farm
www.greenpasturesfarm.net

Bud Williams Stockmanship School and Marketing School
www.stockmanship.com
www.budwilliamsmarketing.com

On May 22-23, livestock industry legends Bud Williams, Greg Judy, and Donnell Brown will share their knowledge and experience at the "Seeds for Success" grazing conference at Eastern Oklahoma State College in Wilburton.

Bud Williams is highly sought after for his two-day seminars on low-stress livestock handling, developed through decades of experience on ranches all over the world. Williams will condense his main principles on that topic, as well as his unique marketing approach, into a single three-hour session covering both marketing and stockmanship.

"My method of working livestock consists of learning to 'read' what the animal is telling you and changing your position so that she wants to go where you want her to go," says Williams.

"It is just a bonus that, by working your animals in this way, you will get the job done faster and with less stress on yourself and your crew."

One of Williams' marketing rules is to "always sell expensive cattle and buy cheap cattle." While this makes sense in theory, he will also explain how to put it into practice regardless of an operation's size, location, industry segment, and even the direction of the market.

Greg Judy will spend Saturday morning covering high stock density grazing and his signature "no-risk ranching" approach.

Judy turned his family's farm finances around by contract grazing on rented acreage. On their farm near Rucker, Missouri, he and his wife Jan currently raise raise cattle, sheep, horses, goats, pigs, and chickens on grass pasture. They use no antibiotics, hormone implants, synthetic fertilizers or herbicides, or grain.

Judy's book, *No Risk Ranching: Custom Grazing on Leased Land*, explains the fundamentals of his signature approach to pasture-based profits in the livestock business. The book describes "how to make a living from the land without owning it" – an approach that took Judy from 40 stockers to over 1,100 head, and enabled him to pay off his farm and home loan in three years.

Donnell Brown will describe how to match cattle to the environment in terms of both genetics and economics. Brown is the seedstock manager, and also handles marketing, for R.A. Brown Ranch in Throckmorton, Texas.

The ranch sells Red Angus females, Black and Red Angus, Simmental, SimAngus, and Hotlander bulls, semen from Black and Red Angus bulls, and quarter horses.

Conference registration costs $200 and includes meals. Please RSVP with a $50 deposit by May 8 to Troy Walker, Eastern OklahomaState College, Attn: Ag Division, 1301 West Main, Wilburton, OK 74578.

For more information, call Troy at 918.465.1725 (office) or secondly at 918.448.7300 (cell).

Space is limited, so register early.

The Kerr Center is sponsoring the "Seeds for Success" conference together with Eastern Oklahoma State College.

WORKSHOPS:
Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and Sustainable Pest Control

These hands-on workshops explore pest management strategies that boost both the environment and farmers' pocketbooks.

Covering topics useful to both new and experienced farmers' market growers, as well as other small-scale producers, the workshops will be offered at various dates and locations this summer (see box).

Participants will learn how to identify insects, weeds, and diseases, and how to safely use a variety of methods, both organic and conventional, to control pests.

The goal of the workshop is to show smaller-scale producers how to reduce pesticide use (and costs) while still getting good crops.

Sessions will cover integrated pest management (IPM) methods, such as using traps and sweeps to estimate insect populations.

Instructors will also focus on efficient use of pesticides, including how to figure the right amounts to use on small acreages. The workshop will include a demonstration of the proper calibration and safe use of backpack sprayers.

Non-chemical methods of pest control such as trap crops and cover crops, as well as organic-approved pesticides, will be also be covered.

Experts from OSU Extension and the Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture will teach the class.

Instructors include Sue Gray, Tulsa County Extension Horticulturist and Extension Educator of the Year; Dr. Donn Johnson, professor of fruit and rice entomology at the University of Arkansas; David Redhage, Natural Resources Economist at the Kerr Center; and local extension specialists.

Registration costs $15 and includes an evening meal. Space is limited; pre-registration is required (see box for deadlines). To register, call 918.647.9123, mail in the form on this page, or use the PayPal link for the event at www.kerrcenter.com.

Workshop Locations & Dates

☐ **TULSA** • July 20 (register by July 13)
4-8 P.M. • Tulsa County OSU Extension Center Auditorium
4116 E. 15th Street

☐ **OKLAHOMA CITY** • July 27 (register by July 20)
4-8 P.M. • OSU-OKC
900 N. Portland Ave.

Check www.kerrcenter.com for additional workshop dates and locations as they are finalized.

Registration Form

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE: _____ ZIP: _____

PHONE _____

EMAIL _____

TOTAL ENCLOSED _____

Mail form and check to:
Kerr Center
Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and Sustainable Pest Control Workshop
PO Box 588
Hwy. 271 South
Poteau, OK 74953

Stewardship Ranch and School of Sustainability Take Horticulture and Organics in New Directions

The just-published 2007 Census of Agriculture reveals that the small acreages so common in Oklahoma's rural landscape are still on the increase. Since 2002, the number of farms smaller than 10 acres grew by nearly 25%.

Horticultural crops, ideal for value-added businesses and direct marketing, make a fine fit for such small farms. With that in mind, the Kerr Center's Horticulture Farm makes finding the crops best adapted to Oklahoma climate and soils, as well as to the small farmer's wallet, an important goal.

The Kerr Center has a long history of work in horticulture. Projects over the years have included small fruit and vegetable production, U-pick marketing, shiitake mushrooms, sweet sorghum, Christmas trees, blueberries, and production of bedding plants.

In 2008, the Kerr Center entered a new era of horticultural work on the Stewardship Ranch, pursuing more in-depth work with organic growing methods and evaluations of heritage crop varieties. The new horticultural thrust will build on the lessons of earlier experiences, trying some new ideas and re-evaluating some old ones.

With student interns actively involved in all phases of production and study, the Kerr Center's internship program intertwines with development of the horticulture project, growing farms and farmers together.

Organic Conversion

Organic production is not new at the Kerr Center. For much of its 15-year history, the original 20-acre horticultural farm was certified organic through the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry.

Over the years, many projects worked to recycle nutrients and build up soil fertility through natural means, experimenting with cover crops, compost, and crop rotations.

Using these methods, staff and interns are currently converting about five acres of pasture to certified organic status as the main demonstration and research site. The site features a long-term soil-building rotation based on cover crops, green manures, and modest inputs of compost.

Heirloom Varieties

Neither is the Kerr Center new to heritage crops. In previous years, specialist David Redhage conducted several trials of traditional vegetable varieties. Heritage (or heirloom) varieties are what some call old-fashioned – non-hybrids.

In 2008, the Kerr Center conducted trials of heirloom okra and sorghum varieties. The results of these trials are now available at www.kerrcenter.com, along with a longer report on the nature and importance of heirloom varieties (see p. 2-6).

Additional elements of the horticultural renovations include a hoop house, greenhouse, and compost area, with student interns playing a major role in these projects.

The Most Important Crop of All

In building a School of Sustainability, the Kerr Center offers internships to college students seeking hands-on experience in agriculture. Intern activities revolve around sustainable livestock and organic horticulture demonstrations, education, and research.

Internships include time for reading, personal research projects, and opportunities to attend educational events, with housing and a monthly stipend provided. Internship positions are limited, and filled months in advance, so early inquiries are encouraged.

The first of the new crop of interns, Jenny Hardy, put in a summer term. A native of Texas, she is majoring in environmental studies at the University of Tulsa. She worked closely with Mary Penick and Andy Makovy on goat and cattle projects.

The fall-term intern for 2008 was Tulsa's Erica Hellen, who is studying at Warren Wilson College in North Carolina, with farm experience gained from her work on the college's student farm and gardens. She helped to bring the hoop house into production for the fall, and also to set up the greenhouse.

The current intern, Bobby Quinn, from Stillwater, arrived in January. A plant biotechnology/mathematics major at OSU, he will be helping to get the pastured poultry project off the ground, and starting transplants in the greenhouse for summer variety trials.

For details on the Kerr Center's organic and heirloom variety projects, as well as the School of Sustainability/Internship program, contact George Kuepper at 918.647.9123 or gkuepper@kerrcenter.com.

From the Interns

These publications from Kerr Center interns are available on the Kerr Center website, www.kerrcenter.com. Stay tuned for more!

Chloe Johnson: Agroforestry Report

Erica Hellen: Idle Impacts (Energy savings for farm vehicles)

Farmland Preservation in Oklahoma

continued from page one

deductions and reduced property taxes.

A bill proposed in the 2008 Oklahoma legislative session would, if passed, have added tax credits to this list. At the same time, conservation easements preserve open space and agricultural productivity. (See sidebar, p. 23, for more on easements.)

The areas that Land Legacy protects include working farm and ranch lands, former rail lines now being converted to trails, greenbelts at urban edges, and parks and other open spaces in the hearts of the state's largest cities.

Trust in the Future

Headquartered in Tulsa, Land Legacy is the only statewide land trust in Oklahoma. Its mission is "to conserve and enhance rural and urban landscapes," preserving open space while allowing agricultural production to continue in areas under high development pressure. The organization serves both Oklahoma and other areas of the south central United States.

Land Legacy works cooperatively with public agencies, other conservation organizations, and landowners to establish long-term conservation goals and programs, to identify specific parcels of land whose conservation is consistent with those goals, and to determine which specific tools are best suited to each individual project.

Land Legacy began as the Oklahoma state office of the Trust for Public Land (TPL), a national, nonprofit land conservation organization. During a nationwide layoff, TPL was forced to close its Oklahoma office.

Jim Horne, who had served for three or four years on the TPL board, began asking the staff of the closing office, "Could we make it on our own?" Ultimately, Horne says, "We chose to go it alone and keep the work going."

A conservation easement is preserving Chitwood Farm in Edmond.

A New Lease

After a meeting with TPL co-chair Don Walker, TPL Oklahoma Director Robert Gregory, and the Kerr Center board of trustees, Horne said, the Kerr Center put some initial seed money into the newly formed Land Legacy to keep farmland preservation going in Oklahoma.

In January 2003, Land Legacy was incorporated as a nonprofit land conservation organization for Oklahoma, with Horne serving on the board of directors.

Its new independent status also allowed Land Legacy to hold conservation easements and other properties, in contrast to TPL's policy of holding properties only temporarily.

According to Gregory – now Land Legacy's Executive Director – the Kerr Center was instrumental in the transition, providing not only financial support but also technical assistance, as well as "opening doors for us with public officials, landowners, and other key parties interested in land conservation."

"Land Legacy is forever indebted to the Kerr Center!" he says.

By the Bootlaces

That admiration flows both ways. "I've got to give a lot of credit to Robert and the staff for staying with it," says Horne. "A couple of times they even missed a paycheck or two."

In the early going, Land Legacy acquired most of its easement acres as donations, from landowners seeking a way to keep farming their land while protecting it from development. Operating funds stayed short, though.

Some early financing came through donations from large easement holders,

Farmland Preservation Online

- **Land Legacy**
  www.landlegacy.net
- **American Farmland Trust**
  www.farmland.org

and a bank loan. "Small infusions of cash would always come at just the right time," Horne says.

"We started doing some work with some developers who wanted to incorporate sustainability into their subdivisions, and got some income from that," Horne recalls.

"That funded a lot."

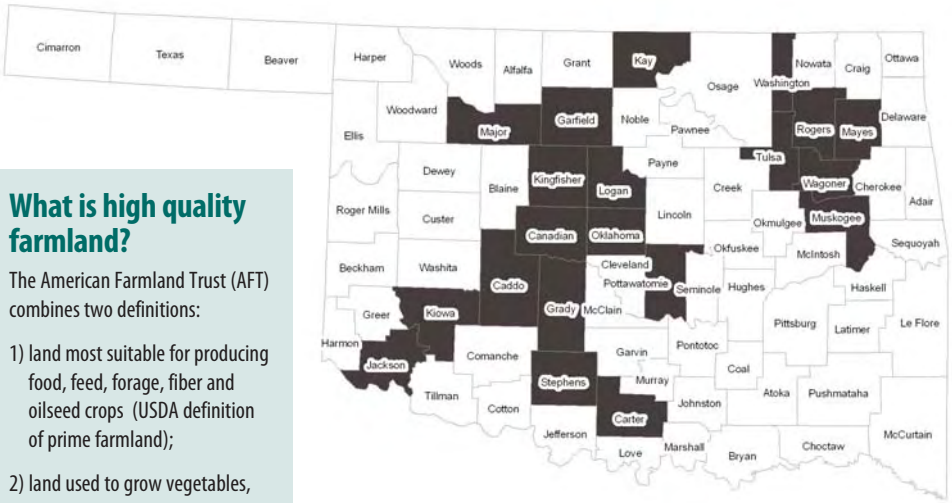
Gradually, the organization's finances eased into the black. Still, as development continued to drive up land prices, chasing donated easements all across the map became less feasible. To adapt, Land Legacy shifted its focus to purchasing more easements, and initiating contacts with landowners. It also devised a new strategic plan.

What is high quality farmland?

The American Farmland Trust (AFT) combines two definitions:

1) land most suitable for producing food, feed, forage, fiber and oilseed crops (USDA definition of prime farmland);

2) land used to grow vegetables, grapes and horticultural crops, including fruits, nuts and berries, that have unique soil and climatic requirements (AFT definition of unique farmland).



Oklahoma Farming on the Edge

High & Low Quality Farmland/Low Develpment

High-Quality Farmland/High Development

Farmland Loss and Preservation in Oklahoma

	1992-1997	1997-2001
Total acres of rural land converted to other uses	187,800	230,000
Average annual rate of all agricultural land converted to other uses	37,560	38,333
Increase in rate of loss of all agricultural acres over previous five years	120%	2%
Number of prime agricultural acres lost	63,300	unknown
Average annual rate of prime agricultural acres lost	12, 660	unknown

New Approaches

"We had to prioritize areas where we could really make a difference, not only where there was a conservation need," says Gregory.

"Now we are focusing our resources by identifying properties that are important to conserve and then knocking on landowners' doors. We have fewer projects and acres, but we have more meaningful results."

The new plan's priority areas include preserving prime agricultural land near urban areas, and protecting the Spavinaw Creek watershed, which provides drinking water for Tulsa.

"We're now being sought out for a number of projects," Horne says. "Nearly every quarter we have two to four projects pending. The largest one is doing a border around Fort Sill."

The Lawton/Fort Sill area forms one of the most active fronts in the first priority area – preserving prime farmland near cities. As urban growth expands toward formerly isolated military bases, training exercises can create nuisances in nearby neighborhoods.

Joining forces with the Department of Defense, Land Legacy is actively working to protect a 20,000-acre buffer zone around Fort Sill. Cache rancher A.J. Ryder sold the first 300-acre easement in July of 2006.

In total, 14 landowners signed commitments to permanently protect their land from development in the Fort Sill Army Compatible Use Buffer Program (ACUBP). In 2007, Land Legacy purchased five of these easements on 426 acres as part of the ACUBP, with funding from the USDA-NRCS Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP).

Help from the Feds

The FRPP operates nationwide, providing up to 50% matching funds for the purchase of conservation easements. In 2006, FRPP allocated over $700,000 to Oklahoma.

The following year, the program doubled its number of easements in the state and nearly doubled its acreage as well, for a total to date of ten easements and 991 acres in four counties. Of these acres, 543 are prime farmland.

The new Farm Bill increased FRPP funding to $743 million over the next five years nationwide. (See p. 13 for other positive outcomes for sustainable agriculture in the Farm Bill.)

Additional funds for the Fort Sill project come from the Department of Defense, the State of Oklahoma, and the Comanche County Industrial Development Authority. That long list of partners is mirrored in Land Legacy's current work in the other priority areas of its strategic plan.

In its efforts to protect the Spavinaw Creek watershed, for example, the organization is partnering with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to preserve strips of buffer vegetation along sensitive creeksides to reduce erosion and agricultural runoff. This will improve water quality for human consumption while preserving habitat for endangered species.

Branching Out

For preservation efforts, especially in high cost areas, Gregory says that more private donations are needed to match USDA funds. Although Land Legacy is the only statewide land trust operating in Oklahoma, other local trusts are also taking up the work of farmland preservation. Examples include the Edmond Land Conservancy and the Norman Area Land Conservancy.

"As sprawl continues, we see smaller communities setting up trusts," Horne observes. "We see that as a positive thing."

Just as agriculture is finding a home in more and more cities worldwide, so is Land Legacy finding that its efforts at preserving agricultural land and open space have a role in Oklahoma's urban areas. For example, it is working with the Tulsa Development Authority to create a string of parks downtown, beginning with the creation of Legacy Place in summer 2004.

It also assists Oklahoma City's "Groundworks" program, which provides funding to clean up contaminated inner-city sites and turn them into open space or new development. The program is funded by the Environmental Protection Agency and administered by the National Park Service.

Conservationist Aldo Leopold once noted that "to keep every wheel and cog is the first rule of intelligent tinkering." Oklahoma's remaining farms and farmers are essential parts of a healthy state food system. Oklahoma would do well to preserve its farmland as it tinkers with new approaches to using it sustainably.

Facts about Conservation Easements

Just as mineral rights and water rights have long been severed, bought, and sold, a willing landowner can sell or donate the development rights to a public agency or a qualified conservation entity through a deed of conservation easement. The landowner retains full possession and use of the property for purposes other than those restricted by the easement.

Conservation easements are voluntary, compensatory tools to protect land from development pressure at prices that are more affordable for public agencies and conservation organizations than outright purchases.

A conservation easement is an economical way to protect scenic views and other open spaces that are important to the community.

Conservation easements may be perpetual or term (set to expire after a predetermined number of years). Donations of easements are only tax deductible, however, if they are perpetual.

Just as importantly, easements leave private lands in private ownership, and keep the land productive, providing essential landowner stewardship and contributing to the local tax base.

Easements provide an economically viable alternative to subdivision and development, by compensating landowners for the development rights they would forego by keeping the bulk of their property as open space, rather than converting it, for example, to a strip mall or a housing subdivision.

Conservation easements are flexible documents; they can be tailored to meet the needs of individual landowners. They can also be tailored to suit unique properties. The specific development rights that a landowner will forgo or restrict are fully negotiable between the landowner and the qualified conservation entity. For example, while restricting a subdivision, landowners may want to reserve the right to develop a limited number of home sites.

Many open space uses are generally permissible including farming, ranching, hunting, fishing, and other activities that do not damage the property's conservation values.

Like other property rights, development rights can be appraised and assessed a value. Depending on proximity to urban areas and other factors, the development rights can comprise over 80% of a property's appraised fair market value.

Donations of conservation easements to eligible entities are normally tax-deductible at their appraised fair market value.

Voluntary conservation easements can be valuable estate planning tools for landowners. By reducing estate taxes, conservation easements can help landowners pass on their land to their children and grandchildren.

Excerpted from *Protecting Farm and Ranch Lands through Conservation Easements*
Robert Gregory and Terence Bidwell
OSU Cooperative Extension Service Fact Sheet F-2879

Calendar: Spring/Summer Events

CONFERENCE:
Sustainability: A New Declaration of Independence
March 20-21- Edmond

As Oklahoma's signature sustainability event, the 8th Annual Oklahoma Sustainability Network Conference brings together a diverse crowd to work toward the common goal of making Oklahoma a more sustainable state. In addition to a keynote address by best-selling author William Greider, the conference features lively and informative sessions on topics including development, agriculture, energy, sustainable business strategies, government policy, ethics, religion, and advocacy. Registration is $75, with discounts for single-day attendance and students. For more information or to register, visit oksustainability.org/2009conference.php

CONFERENCE: Return to Your Roots Food Sovereignty Symposium
March 20-21 - Okmulgee

The Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative (MFSI) will host this educational event to improve the local food system and to motivate the Mvskoke people. The panel consists of expert presenters from different tribes. For more information, contact MFSI at 918.756.5915.

CONFERENCE: Seeds for Success: Cattle Grazing
May 22-23 - Wilburton

Livestock industry legends Bud Williams, Greg Judy, and Donnell Brown will share their knowledge and experience at the "Seeds for Success" grazing conference at Eastern Oklahoma State College in Wilburton. Registration costs $200 and includes meals. Please RSVP with a $50 deposit by May 8 to Troy Walker, Eastern Oklahoma State College, Attn: Ag Division, 1301 West Main, Wilburton, OK 74578. For more information or to register, contact Troy Walker at 918.465.1725. (See p. 18.)

DEADLINE:
Nominations for Meat Goat Forage Performance Test
June 15

Nomination forms are due on this date from goat producers wishing to test their bucks' performance on forage in a test conducted by the Kerr Center and the OSU Cooperative Extension Service. For details and forms, visit the Kerr Center website at www.kerrcenter.com. (See p. 12.)

WORKSHOP: Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and Sustainable Pest Control
July 20-Tulsa and July 27-OKC

Experts from OSU Extension and the Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture will teach these workshops on money-saving pest management strategies for small-scale vegetable producers. (For more information and registration, see p. 19.)

Hoop House Workshops
Fall - dates TBA

Fall is the perfect time to build a hoop house to extend your growing season. These workshops demonstrate the quick and easy approach used by Tod and Jamie Hanley at Trebuchet Gardens in Norman to build a 25' x 96' hoop house for under $1000.
These extremely popular workshops have room for only a limited number of participants, so call Kerr Center at 918.647.9123 to reserve a space.

KERR CENTER

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Saving Choctaw Horses