



Field Notes

Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture E-Newsletter

E-Field Notes

September 2020

Happy fall! We welcome the season with good news from a couple of different fronts at the national level.

First, large-scale survey data show continuing **widespread adoption of cover crops**.

Secondly, the latest **acreage totals from the Conservation Reserve Program Grasslands** signup are in. They're high overall, and **Oklahoma is among the highest**.

On a smaller scale, we share the results of the horticulture program's work this summer **growing peppers in self-wicking containers**.

Also, don't miss David Redhage's tip for **modifying our chicken tractor plans to give your back a rest**.

No matter which of these directions your interest in sustainable agriculture runs in, we're doing our best to keep you supplied with the highest-quality information to help you pursue it. If it's helpful, please consider letting us know it with a [donation](#). [Thank you!](#)

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One of our more popular publications for downloading is the [chicken tractor plans](#). I always field questions about the plans every year. Some ask how many chickens it will hold; others ask about the construction, or to clarify something in the plans.



One change I always recommend is to increase the height of the front cage area. The current plans make it so short that you need to stoop over to get inside. Why not make it high enough to walk in upright? The materials cost will not increase that much, and it's much easier on your back if you need to work inside the coop area.

We have not made this change to our chicken tractor, or to the plans, but it simply requires four taller posts, longer boards for the door, and some additional chicken wire. So far no one has called me back to say it did not work.

Feel free to experiment with the design. I have noticed numerous versions of the chicken tractor online. Everyone has some new ideas on how to build a chicken tractor, usually customizing it for their operation.

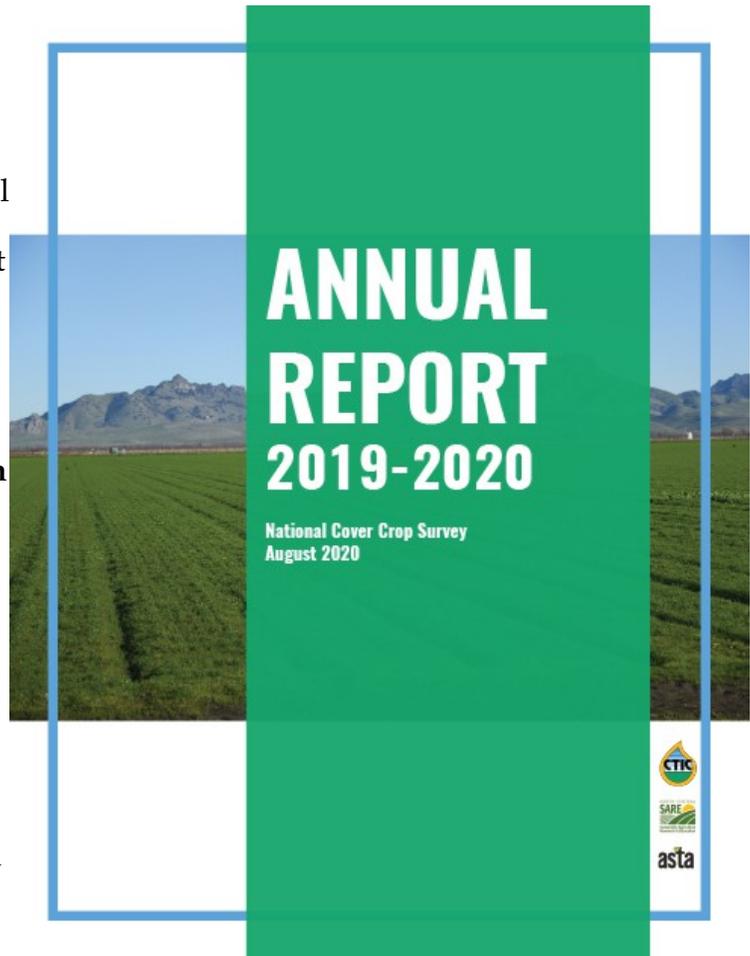
Cover Crops: National Survey Documents Benefits and Expanded Acreage

[via SARE:](#)

Despite the crippling rainfall that significantly delayed planting across much of the country in 2019, more than 90% of farmers participating in a national cover crop survey reported that [cover crops](#) allowed them to plant earlier or at the same time as non-cover-cropped fields.

Among those who had "planted green," seeding cash crops into growing cover crops, 54% said the practice helped them plant earlier than on other fields.

Those findings were among several new insights from the [2019-2020 National Cover Crop Survey](#), conducted by the nonprofit Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC), with financial support from SARE and the American Seed Trade Association (ASTA). These organizations have worked together on several past national cover crop surveys, with the first survey dating back to the 2012 crop year.



The 2019-2020 survey, which included perspectives from **1,172 farmers representing every state**, was the first by SARE, CTIC and ASTA to include detailed exploration of planting green - a tactic employed by 52% of the respondents - as well as **crop insurance** use among cover croppers and the impact of cover crops on the profitability of **horticultural operations**.

"Many U.S. farmers have turned to cover crops as part of their strategy to improve soil health while reducing input costs and maintaining yields," stated Mike Smith, who managed the national survey for CTIC. Survey participants averaged 465 acres in cover crops in 2019, an increase of 38% in four years. **The USDA Census of Agriculture found a 50% increase in cover crop acreage over the five-year period between 2012 and 2017.**

[Continue reading....](#)

Oklahoma in Top 10 Nationwide for CRP Acreage

via the [National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition](#):

Oklahoma ranks 9th in the nation for acres in [Conservation Reserve Program \(CRP\) Grasslands](#) signups, according to USDA data shared by the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC).

In July 2020, the Farm Service Agency (FSA) announced that it accepted around 1.2 million new acres into the Conservation Reserve



Program (CRP) Grasslands initiative. These acres were accepted from applications submitted between March 16 and May 15, 2020.

While other variations of CRP support conservation by removing land from cultivation for extended periods of time - up to 15 years - CRP's Grasslands program is unique in that it promotes the conservation of grassland by permitting its use as grazing land. Grazing and healthy grassland ecosystems can coexist, and, in many cases, enhance one another. [Well-managed grazing](#), especially on lands covered with native grasses, can provide healthier habitat for wildlife and can minimize invasive species. Native grass ecosystems also attract insect-eating birds which can help keep pest populations that stress livestock under control.

Land Eligible for CRP Grasslands

The grassland enrollment prioritizes expiring CRP contracts, lands at risk of conversion or development, and grasslands important to wildlife and the local ecosystem.

Livestock operations can be put in place or continued when enrolled in CRP Grasslands on the condition that grassland resources are protected. This can include common grazing, [haying](#), certain seed harvesting, [controlled burns](#), and fire mitigation strategies.

CRP Grasslands was created in the 2014 Farm Bill and was developed further in the 2018 Farm Bill. By October of 2020, with these new enrollments, the total amount of land under CRP Grasslands is expected to be 2.1 million acres. Because of this Farm Bill provision, this year's signup period was able to exceed the last signup period threefold (compared to 2016 enrollments).

[Continue reading....](#)

Pepper Production in Wicking Containers

by Karlee Pruitt

During the summer of 2020, we decided to plant pepper plants within the same wicking containers used for the tomato variety trials in our coldframe. We did not collect production data, since these plants were grown as a preliminary idea.

The four pepper varieties we used were Highlander Anaheim, Red Ember Cayenne, Early Jalapeño, and Jimmy Nardello.

Highlander Anaheim is a slightly spicy, large pepper. These plants were very large and very productive.

The Red Ember Cayenne is a moderately spicy, medium-sized pepper. It was the first to produce fruit and turn red. Cayennes have been harvested off of this plant since late May, and it was still in full production as of late August.

The Early Jalapeño was very surprising. It is a relatively small pepper, but is very spicy - even more so than larger jalapeños found in stores.

The only sweet pepper we used was the Jimmy Nardello. This pepper ended up having the best flavor out of all the peppers. While green, the peppers are very mild, but as soon as the pepper turns red, the sugars become very pronounced, and this creates an outstanding flavor.

The three spicy varieties, (Highlander Anaheim, Red Ember Cayenne, and Early Jalapeño) can be sourced from Johnny's Seeds in Maine, and the Jimmy Nardello can be sourced from Osborne Seeds in Washington.

We observed that the pepper plants thrived within the wicking container system. Three plants were planted in each 30-gallon container. While the plants did thrive, we noted that the plants in containers with just two plants were larger and had higher production.

For those wishing to have a few plants within wicking containers, we suggest using pepper plants! These plants can be transplanted by April, with production beginning in June and continuing into the fall.

[See more photos....](#)



Fall Events: Elderberries, Composting, Organic Pest Management...

September ends with an **elderberry harvest and processing webinar** (Sept. 29), and the first of Oklahoma County OCES' **Master Composter trainings** (Sept. 30, continuing weekly).

NCAT has a **free webinar on organic pest management** (Oct. 7). Oklahoma County OCES is also offering a series of **beginning farmer workshops**, with the first on Oct. 16.

Our **tour** season has **concluded for the year**. Please come and see us again in the spring!

Full details on these and other sustainable agriculture learning opportunities, as always, can be found on the Kerr Center's online [events calendar](#).

SEP 29 Tue	Elderberry Processing and Market Opportunities (webinar) @ online   Sep 29 @ 12:00 pm
SEP 30 Wed	Oklahoma County Master Composter Training 2020  Sep 30 @ 1:30 pm – 4:30 pm
OCT 7 Wed	Oklahoma County Master Composter Training 2020  Oct 7 @ 1:30 pm – 4:30 pm Webinar: Managing Pests Organically in the Garden and Orchard @ online   Oct 7 @ 5:00 pm – 6:30 pm
OCT 8 Thu	ATTRA Webinar Series: Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART), Part 3: Deep Dive @ online   Oct 8 @ 1:00 pm
OCT 14 Wed	POSTPONED: Rural Economic Outlook Conference 2020 @ Stillwater (Click Alumni Hall, OSU Alumni Center)   Oct 14 @ 8:00 am – 3:30 pm Oklahoma County Master Composter Training 2020  Oct 14 @ 1:30 pm – 4:30 pm
OCT 16 Fri	OSU Beginning Farmer Workshops @ Oklahoma City (Oklahoma County Extension Office)  Oct 16 

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** 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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