



Field Notes

Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture E-Newsletter

E-Field Notes

February 2023

Did the groundhog see its shadow where you live? Maybe your local livestock vet did instead - or, at least, **food-animal vets are getting harder and harder to find**, according to a new report.

Actually, the poor groundhog apparently has a pretty poor record at accurately forecasting spring's arrival. But it's hard to blame anyone for missing the prediction, with all the wild swings in the weather lately. As it turns out, an old technique of **planting mixed grains may hold new promise for climate resilience in agriculture**.

No matter when spring truly arrives, we can count on summer being close behind - and long, and hot. **The south is one of the hardest regions for maintaining - much less building! - soil organic matter**, but a new free online course aims to give southern-region farmers the best available advice on how to pull off that feat.

No matter the weather, we'll keep going strong at the Kerr Center, as long as you [keep the donations coming](#). [Thank you!](#)

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Running out of Vets?

Rare's the keeper of livestock who doesn't sleep easier at night knowing that the local vet is just a phone call away should any [animal health](#) emergencies arise. But according to a new report, that **veterinary safety net is rapidly disappearing from large swaths of the U.S. countryside**. Is farm country running out of vets?

Published by the Farm Journal Foundation, the report argues that, with the **costs of vet school rising**, more and more **newly minted veterinarians are setting up shop in cities and suburbs**, where incomes are higher than in traditional food-animal practices.

The numbers back up that claim. **Four decades ago, 40% of newly graduated veterinarians started practices focusing on food animals. Nowadays, that figure is ten times lower.** That leaves 500 counties in the U.S. without adequate access to food animal veterinarians.

The problem runs even deeper. In addition to **creating shortages of the private practitioners that ranchers rely on**, it's also **hollowing out the ranks of veterinary public health providers**. Though less well known, these individuals are critical for **maintaining food safety and preventing and mitigating animal disease epidemics** - like the avian flu that has sent egg prices soaring over the last several months.

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Addressing the Persistent Shortage of Food Animal Veterinarians and Its Impact on Rural Communities

Clinton L. Neill, Ph.D.



Borrowing from the Past? Grain Mixes for Climate Resilience

Adapting ancient farming practices to modern sustainable agriculture is nothing new - just consider [biochar](#) and [agroforestry](#), as a couple of prominent examples.

The latest such loan from the past involves the practice of **planting mixes of grain species in the same field**. This technique, once widespread, presumably dropped from use with the advent of mechanized harvesting, which favored the modern fashion for monoculture.



However, mixing things up offers a **key benefit**: out of the mix of seeds planted, *something is likely to produce a harvestable yield, no matter the vagaries of the weather* in that particular growing season.

For example, one of the most common grain mixes grown in Georgia (the country, that is - the epicenter of wheat diversity) includes both wheat and barley. If the weather turns drier, not much of the wheat will grow, but the more drought-resistant barley will likely still produce a harvest.

Such **mixes of grain crops, called maslins**, traditionally include more than just two kinds of seed. Other common members of maslins include rice, millet, rye, triticale, and emmer.

The practice - which has never been abandoned in some areas - was **"rediscovered" by a doctoral student** at Cornell University during his dissertation fieldwork in Georgia. Other researchers at Cornell are now conducting experiments in New York state, testing whether a mixture of wheat and barley is more resistant to barley yellow dwarf virus than either crop grown in isolation.

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Soil Health for the Southern Region: Online Course

Maintaining and building [soil health](#) is nowhere more important than in the southern U.S. - but that's also where it's most challenging. A new, free online course aims to help farmers in the region rise to that challenge.

In the southern states, temperatures are higher, and the growing season lasts longer, extending the conditions under which soil organic matter tends to be lost - and often creating soils which are more limited in fertility from the get-go.

At the same time, pressures from weeds, insect pests, and plant pathogens are all higher than in more northerly latitudes, increasing the incentive for tillage and other practices destructive of soil organic matter.

The **Organic Farming Research Foundation** recently published a [guidebook](#) to help southern farmers build soil organic matter even under these daunting conditions. Now, the organization has gone one step further, developing an **online course based on the book's content**.

According to the course website, "The goal of this new course is to **help the region's current and aspiring organic producers develop effective, site-specific soil health management strategies** that support successful, resilient enterprises."

The course is **free, and self-directed, allowing students to work at their own pace** as time allows. It explores ways of applying organic soil management principles, highlighting **practical approaches developed by farmers** in the southern region. It also includes links to additional resources, including more **in-depth information on particular topics, common soil types, and current soil health research**.

[Soil Health Strategies for the Southern Region](#) is available free from the Organic Farming Research Foundation website.



Late Winter Events: BIPOC Micro-grants, Local Ag Summit, Conferences, Blue Thumb Training....

There's a lot happening the last day of February! Applications are due for Rodale Institute's **BIPOC Farmer Micro-Grants** program, the **Oklahoma Local Agriculture Summit** kicks off (in Broken Arrow), NCAT's **Growing Hope** online conference and virtual **Small-Scale Growing & Marketing** workshop both continue, and Monarch Joint Venture's **Western Monarch Mystery Challenge** webinar streams.

Moving into March, you can catch another installment of NCAT's **Growing Hope** online conference (Mar. 2), learn how to use the **NRCS Regional**

Conservation Partnership Program to support agroforestry enterprises in a USDA webinar (Mar. 3), **get trained as a Blue Thumb stream monitoring volunteer** (Tahlequah, Mar. 4), and zoom into the **virtual InTents Farmers Market** conference (Mar. 6).

It's a busy season for sustainable agriculture-related educational activities, and **what fits into this email only scratches the surface**. Get the full scoop, as always, on the Kerr Center's online [events calendar](#).

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.

The screenshot shows a calendar interface with the following events:

- FEB 28 Tue**: BIPOC Farmer Micro-Grants (application deadline) (Feb 28 all-day)
- FEB 28 - Mar 2 all-day**: Oklahoma Local Agriculture Summit @ Broken Arrow (Tickets)
- FEB 28 @ 10:00 am - 1:00 pm**: Growing Hope: Practical Tools for Our Changing Climate @ online (Tickets)
- FEB 28 @ 12:00 pm - 1:30 pm**: Small-Scale Growing and Marketing for Beginning Farmers: Producing and Marketing Grains @ online (Tickets)
- FEB 28 @ 1:00 pm - 2:00 pm**: Western Monarch Mystery Challenge (MJV webinar) @ online (Tickets)
- MAR 2 Thu**: Growing Hope: Practical Tools for Our Changing Climate @ online (Tickets)
- MAR 3 Fri**: Agroforestry & USDA Webinar Series: NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program @ online (Tickets)
- MAR 4 Sat**: Blue Thumb Volunteer Training - Tahlequah @ Tahlequah (Tahlequah Municipal Armory) (Tickets)
- MAR 6 Mon**: InTents Farmers Market Conference @ online / San Diego, CA (Mar 6 - Mar 8 all-day) (Tickets)

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