Field Notes

Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture E-Newsletter

E-Field Notes
March 2023

Spring has sprung! David Redhage catches the spirit of the season with a review of a **new book on getting organic operations started, fast, by focusing on the soil first**.

As if that weren't inspiration enough, don't miss an **upcoming RFD-TV episode highlighting sustainable innovations in agriculture**. It was **made in collaboration with SARE, and premieres March 29**.

If you're planting for pollinators, don't forget that **Monarch Watch offers free milkweed seedlings for schools, non-profits, and large-scale restoration projects**.

If your spring projects tend more toward launching a new **direct-market meat enterprise**, there's a **helpful new guide** out to get you started.

Spring is for picnics, and ants are infamous for spoiling those - but **new research shows that ants may be more effective than chemical insecticides at reducing pest damage in crops**.

We'd be tickled if your spring to-do list included **making a donation to the Kerr Center**. If you're an early bird and have already checked that one off, **thank you**!

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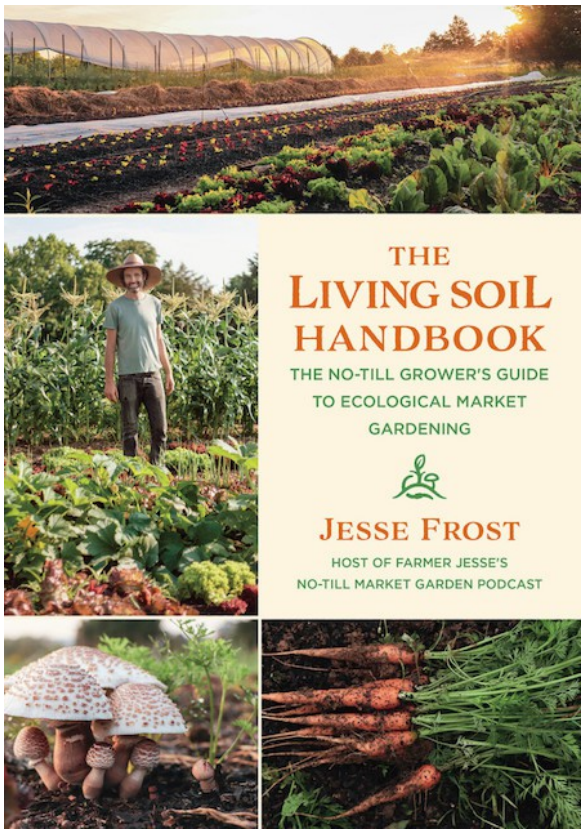
President's Note: Book Review - *The Living Soil Handbook*



Recently I had the opportunity to **interview the author** of the book entitled ***The Living Soil Handbook: The No-Till Grower's Guide to Ecological Market Gardening***. The author, Jesse Frost, had moved several times over the last several years, and as a result he has needed to refine his methods for **bringing soil up to a productive level fast**.

The book has a lot of information packed into such a limited space. He grows organically, and most soils take three to five years to "settle down" and show the benefits after changing to an organic system.

He focuses on **improving the soil biology first and foremost**. The author used any technique allowed under **organic regulations** to improve the soil.

He also looks at each property and breaks it down into areas, and uses the best methods for each. In other words, one technique is not used on the entire property. He uses some raised beds, cardboard for weed suppression, **compost**, **cover crops, and crop rotation**. While he uses woven landscape fabric, he has concerns about plastic mulches, based on some of the potential issues with small plastic particles contaminating the soil.

Because he and his family have moved so many times, he focuses on keeping the production tools mobile. Cold frames are mobile for easy tear down. Infrastructure and equipment are selected based on need and the ability to easily move to a new farm if needed.

If you are interested in **no-till organics**, this book is a good place to start.

RFD-TV Episode to Highlight Sustainable Innovations in Farming

via SARE

Tune in to RFD-TV on March 29 at 5:30 P.M. EDT for the premiere of a new "America's Heartland" **episode showcasing farmers and ranchers from across the country who are leaders in sustainability**.

SARE partnered with PBS KVIE to produce this episode, which features farmers describing their commitment to sustainability, how they plan to meet farming challenges of today and tomorrow, and how SARE has impacted their farming practices.

Watch as Bryce Wrigley of Delta Junction, Alaska, discusses the importance of **soil health** and how **cover crops** have improved his overall operation. He addresses the need for building **food security** in Alaska as well as how his farm is working to address this issue at the local level. Lastly, see how Wrigley works to share his newfound knowledge with other farmers.

In North Dakota, brother and sister Drew and Erin Guagler run a 4,000-acre ranch. The Guaglers have received several SARE grants over the years to test out new farming methods on their land. They'll talk about their grant projects that focused on **bale grazing as a way to improve soil health**. By prioritizing the health of the land, they know they'll be able to pass it down to future generations.

Pennsylvania farmer Hannah Brubaker-Smith's story is unique because she not only received a SARE grant but also served as a leader on the SARE committee that decides how the grant programs will address agricultural needs throughout the Northeast. She and her wife Debra have been farming in Cuba Mills, Pennsylvania, on land that has been in the family for 40 years. They'll share how **diversification and new marketing opportunities** have benefited their farm.

Lastly, the episode features a collaboration between farmers and researchers: an important component of many SARE grants that allows innovative ideas to be tested in real-world farming conditions. In west Texas, Dr. Reagan Noland is working with rancher Chad Raines to see if **running sheep in organic cotton** can be an effective method of **weed management** that allows a farmer to reduce tillage.

Watch the episode on RFD-TV, March 29, at 5:30 P.M. EDT. RFD-TV is carried nationwide on DISH and DIRECTV (satellite), and many cable systems: **https://www.rfdtv.com/find-us-on-tv**.

Free Milkweed Seedlings for Schools, Non-Profits, and Large-Scale Restoration Projects

Monarch Watch is providing **free milkweed seedlings** to school and non-profit organizations, as well as in larger quantities for large-scale restoration projects.

For each qualifying school and non-profit, Monarch Watch supplies a single flat of 32 milkweed seedlings, thanks to funding from the Natural Resources Defense Council.

For large-scale restoration projects, the minimum award is four flats (three flats in California). Restoration project recipients must pay shipping costs, usually $10-15 per flat (20-30 cents per plant). "Large-scale" is defined as a minimum of two acres, or one acre in California.

For more information and details on how to apply, visit one of the following links on the Monarch Watch website:
Schools and Non-Profits
Restoration Projects

Guide Helps Beginners with Direct-Marketing Meat

Following the time-honored profit strategy of cutting out the middleman, **direct marketing** is an appealing option for many **meat** producers. Its growing popularity in recent years attests to that.

However, direct marketing is not a silver bullet, and multiple **potential pitfalls complicate the path to profitability**. For meat producers who are contemplating **direct marketing for the first time**, these can be **daunting**.

To help minimize that hurdle, there's now a **valuable new guide**: the ***Beginner's Resource Guide to Direct Marketing Meat***. Published by the Pasture Project at the Wallace Center, this free online guide is **designed to be a "first resource"** for those new to direct marketing, as well as existing direct marketers who are considering adding a new enterprise.

It is organized as a **"guide to guides,"** to **help producers quickly and easily identify** which of a wide array of existing resources will be **most helpful for their particular needs**. Topic areas include **business planning, processing, labels and certification, and marketing**, among many others.

Download the Beginner's Guide to Direct Marketing Meat

Ants Better than Insecticides?

They are possibly most famous for wrecking picnics - but new research shows that **ants may be an important tool for managing insect pests on crops, perhaps even more effectively than chemical insecticides**.

The study combined results from hundreds of other studies published within the last 35 years. In all these studies, ants were removed from one treatment, but allowed to roam freely in another.

Overall, the researchers found that **having ants present in cropped fields and orchards tended to reduce the number of insect pests**. The more diverse the mix of ant species, the bigger the anti-pest effect.

There were a few "buts," though. The biggest one is that ants actually protect a handful of pest species - aphids, whiteflies, and mealybugs - that produce sugary secretions called honeydew. The ants herd and tend these species to gather that energy-rich food source. When ants are present, the numbers of these honeydew-producing pest species actually increase.

Having more ants around also tended to decrease the number of other beneficial insects that might have preyed on insect pests.

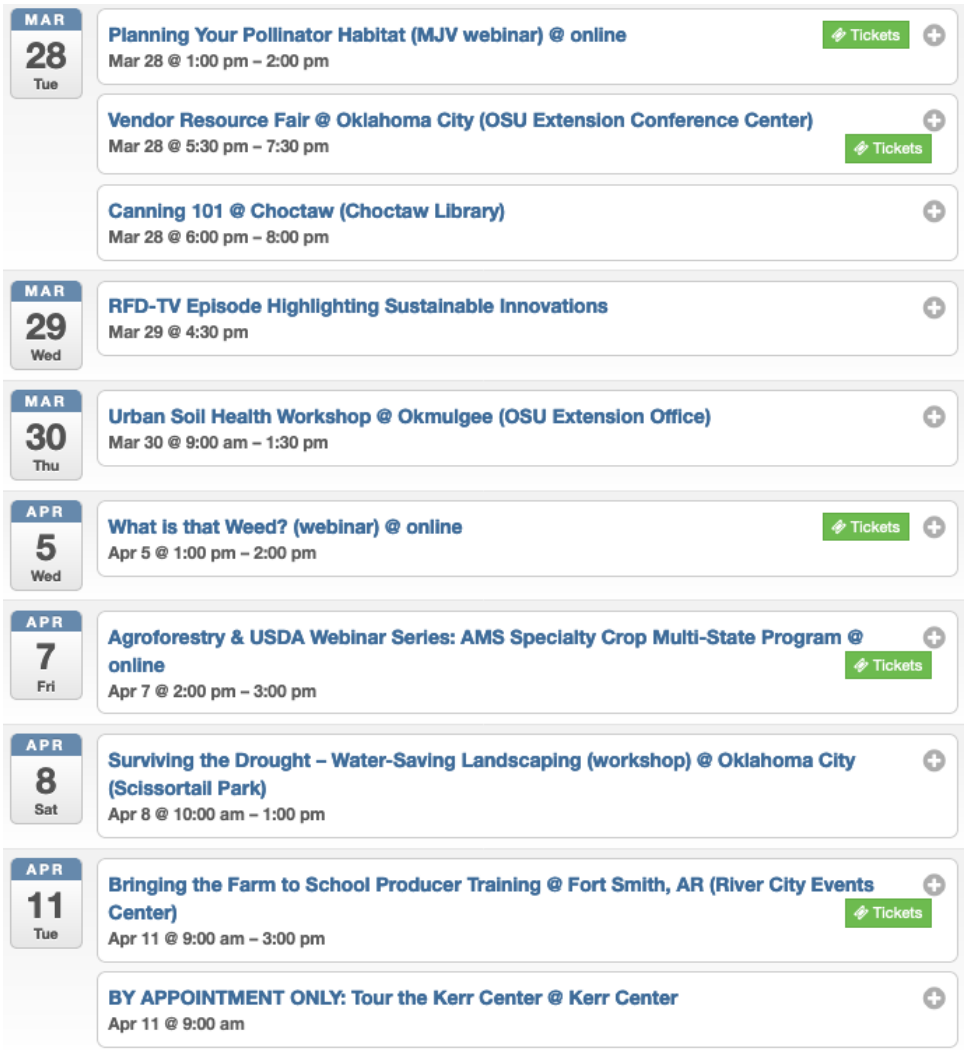
However, even with ants increasing the number of aphid-like pests, and driving off other beneficial insects, the overall finding was that **crop damage from insect pests was reduced, and crop yield increased, when ants were present**.

Some ant species, the researchers wrote, were as effective, or even **more effective, than chemical insecticides - and at lower cost**.

Many of these studies were conducted in tropical regions with warm-weather crops, so the concept is far from fully tested for Oklahoma. Also, many of us might be happy to see the insecticide bill go up if it meant we could get rid of fire ants. Still, if you give this a try, we'd be interested to hear how it goes!

The **study** was published in *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*.

Early Spring Events: Pollinator Planning, Farmers Markets, Canning, Weed ID, Soil Health, Farm to School....



A slew of upcoming **webinars** can get you up to speed on **planning pollinator habitat** (Mar. 28), **identifying weeds** (Apr. 5), and using **AMS Specialty Crop Grants to support agroforestry** (Apr. 7).

In person, you can **learn to can** (Mar. 28, Choctaw), find out about **resources for farmers market vendors** (also Mar. 28, Oklahoma City), get the scoop on **urban soil health** (Mar. 20, Okmulgee), pick up **water-saving landscaping techniques** (Apr. 8, Oklahoma City), and get trained up on **selling meat and produce to local schools** (Apr. 11, Ft. Smith, AR).

Instead of selling veggies, would you rather just veg out in front of the tube? Take in a **new RFD-TV episode highlighting sustainable innovations in agriculture, premiering March 29**.

The **Kerr Center's** tour **season kicks off again on April 11**. Tours are second Tuesdays, by appointment - **come visit us!**

There are many more sustainable agriculture educational activities going on, and we're adding more to the calendar all the time. Get the latest on our 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.

Support the Kerr Center

Since 1965 the Kerr Center has been reaching out to folks in Oklahoma and beyond. Today, the Friends of the Kerr Center help us continue this vital work! If you enjoy reading this newsletter or visiting our website, please consider making a gift to the Kerr Center today!

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