



Field Notes

Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture E-Newsletter

E-Field Notes

July 2023

Looking for something to read in the shade? SARE has a **new book out on farming with soil life - check out David Redhage's review.**

With summer vacation in swing, how about a **getaway to one of Oklahoma's agritourism destinations? There are plenty of them, of all kinds - but a new compilation of ag census data shows the sector still has plenty of room to grow in the state.**

Beekeepers are keeping honeybee numbers steady despite **losing nearly half their colonies over the past year.** Everyone can help - and **the most effective strategies can help native pollinators as well.**

Better yet, there are a number of conservation initiatives that will **help you help the bees in your own backyard** - as well as growing food, saving soil and water, and more!

At the Kerr Center, we're always trying to help you help yourself become a better steward. One of the signs we're succeeding is when people like our work so much that they help us back, by [donating to the Kerr Center](#). [Thank you!](#)

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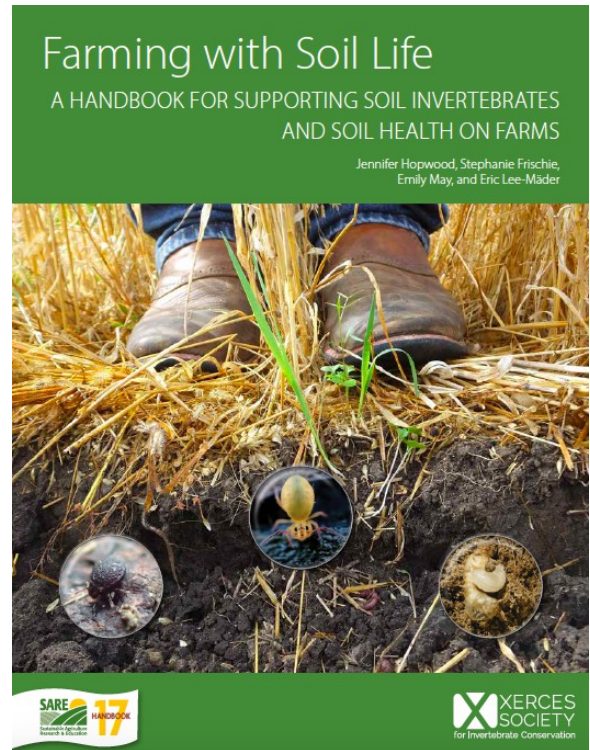
President's Note: Farming with Soil Life

The [national SARE program](#), in conjunction with the [Xerces Society](#), has released a new book, titled *Farming with Soil Life: A Handbook for Supporting Soil Invertebrates and Soil Health On Farms*.

The book is short for the subject matter, at only 127 pages, but a large portion is devoted to a **photo guide for micro, meso, and macro soil fauna**. While you won't ID specific species, you will better understand what is found in the soil.

For each group identified, there is a description of the species and how it impacts soil health. The beginning chapters describe **practices for improving and maintaining soil health in terms of how it affects soil invertebrates**.

This is a very good book, and if you are interested in the subject of soil invertebrates and soil health, it would be a nice addition to your library. [It is available as a pdf for free, or as a hard copy for \\$28.](#)



Agritourism in Oklahoma: Room to Grow!

Plenty of people will open their wallets for a taste of farm life - that's the whole principle that agritourism is built on. **Oklahoma has plenty of agritourism enterprises, but how do they stack up compared to the other 49 states?** A [new series of agritourism fact sheets](#) answers that question.

A quick look at [ODAFF's Oklahoma Agritourism website](#) demonstrates just how **widespread and diverse the state's agritourism offerings** have become. From breweries to bed-&-breakfasts, farmers markets to crop mazes, and wineries to wedding venues, there's something for almost every interest.

Still, **a look at national averages shows that Oklahoma agritourism has plenty of room to grow.** According to USDA 2017 Census of Agriculture data, compiled by a team of researchers from universities in several states, including OSU, **Oklahoma has 3.8% of the nation's farms, but just 1.9% of the agritourism operations.**

The team broke agritourism operations down into three categories: those with direct sales only, like farm stands; those with some other form of agritourism, like farm stays or petting zoos; and those that combine both.

The researchers published this information in a **series of fact sheets** - one for the [U.S. overall](#), and one for each state. The fact sheets also go into detail about the **demographic and business information on farms engaged in agritourism** enterprises, including farmer age and gender, crops grown, farm size, and farm income generated by agritourism and direct sales.

For example, the [Oklahoma fact sheet](#) shows that there are 78,531 total farms, including 2,292 that sell their products directly to consumers, 709 that offer agritourism activities but don't sell directly to consumers, and 52 that engage in both activities.

Cattle are still king in Oklahoma, even in agritourism. Nationwide, of farms with agritourism only, 32% produce beef cattle. In Oklahoma, that figure is 55%.

By facilitating comparisons of such state-level findings, the fact sheets also highlight **regional and national trends**. For instance, about one out of every five farms in the U.S. that offer some form of agritourism, including direct sales, are in the northeastern region alone. This, too, highlights the **opportunities awaiting Oklahoma agritourism entrepreneurs**.

If you think helping to grow Oklahoma agritourism is role your operation might play, there's a wealth of additional information and support to be had from [ODAFF's Oklahoma Agritourism website](#).

Agritourism in Oklahoma

Oklahoma has 78,531 Farms

Agritourism activities fit within five main categories:

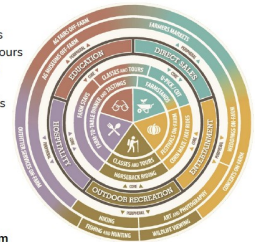
- **Direct sales:** consumers buy directly from farmers
- **Education:** learning experiences, such as school tours
- **Hospitality:** includes farm stays, on-farm dinners
- **Outdoor recreation:** outdoor farm experiences
- **Entertainment:** on-farm activities such as festivals

According to the 2017 Agricultural Census,

Oklahoma has 3,053 Farms offering

Direct Sales or Agritourism

- 2,292 Farms with only Direct Sales
- 709 Farms with only Agritourism
- 52 Farms with both Direct Sales and Agritourism



Second Largest Honeybee Decline Ever

Over the past year, the **U.S. honeybee population declined by the second largest amount ever**. The largest decline happened just two years before, in 2020-2021.

That's according to preliminary data from the [Bee Informed Partnership's Colony Loss and Management Survey](#), a yearly survey of U.S. beekeepers ranging in size from backyard (up to 50 colonies) to commercial (more than 50 colonies).

Overall, **from April 1 of last year to the same date this year, U.S. beekeepers lost nearly half - 48% - of their colonies.**

In the one worse year on record, 2020-21, the loss rate was over half, at 51%.

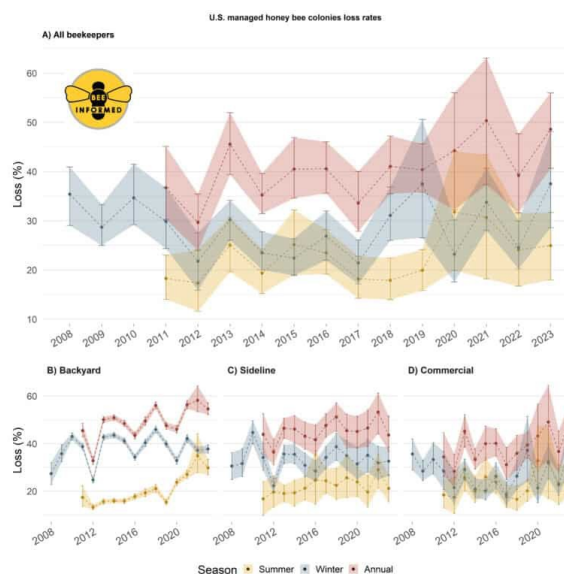
The **largest causes of colony loss were *Varroa* mites, queen issues, and weather**. At the commercial scale, **pesticide losses were also significant**, though this factor was not as much of an issue for backyard or sideline-scale beekeepers.

In the 1980s, when the *Varroa* mite first became widespread in North America, colony loss rates took their first big jump up, to around 20%. Colony collapse disorder (CCD), appearing in the 2000s, caused another big bump. CCD has since declined somewhat, but overall colony loss rates have remained historically high.

Since the Bee Informed Partnership survey began, in 2007, the average yearly nationwide colony loss rate has been around 40%. The overall number of colonies has remained more or less the same over that time period - about 2.6 million. That means that **beekeepers are coming up with ways to replace about two out of every five colonies they keep, year after year.**

That seems like a precarious treadmill for agricultural pollination to be running on, with an estimated **one out of every three bites of food humans consume coming from a crop pollinated by honeybees**. The natural response might be to [take up beekeeping](#), and many people are doing just that. However, as the Xerces Society's Scott Black memorably pointed out, that's a bit like trying to save threatened songbird populations by raising more chickens. Besides, [native bees are effective crop pollinators](#) in their own right.

[What can you do to help?](#)



Conservation in Your Own Back Yard

The phrase “soil and water conservation” tends to conjure mental images of wide open spaces: fields, pastures, lakes, streams. Just as important, though, are **urban conservation efforts at the scale of your own back yard.**

As awareness of this fact grows, **programs are popping up to promote conservation efforts in towns and cities - and to recognize the individuals who take them on.**

KOTV featured one such program, the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts' [Yard-by-Yard program](#), in a [recent news segment](#). To qualify for the program, residents **implement at least five practices from at least three of four categories: soil health, water conservation, home food production, and wildlife habitat.**



For soil health, practices such as [composting](#), mulch mowing, and organic mulches qualify. Water conservation includes efficient irrigation, rain barrels, and xeriscaping. A [vegetable or herb garden](#), fruit trees, [chickens](#) or [goats](#), and [honeybees](#) all check boxes in the home food production category, while [native plants](#), water sources, and houses for bats, native bees, or birds, are just a few of the many options for wildlife conservation.

Many people may already be doing enough of these things to certify their yards in the program, without even realizing it. For many others, the steps required would be few and simple. **Certified yards receive an attractive sign** to recognize the resident's efforts and raise awareness of the program.

In addition to the Yard by Yard program, there are **several other initiatives to promote yard-scale urban conservation** around the state and across the nation. Okies for Monarchs maintains an [online list](#) of these, which include Monarch Watch's [Monarch Waystation](#) program, the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife's [Wildscapes](#), and the National Wildlife Federation's [Certified Wildlife Habitat](#).

The practices required to qualify for these programs, and the impact of their adoption in a single yard, may seem small in the face of the challenges they're meant to address. As the Yard by Yard website points out, though, the principle of strength in numbers is very much in effect. These “individual stewardship efforts contribute to a greater movement reclaiming our connection to the Earth one yard at a time.”

Summer Events: Seed Saving, Moth Week, Nuts, Environmental Education, Beekeeping, Monarch Blitz....

The **Seed Savers Exchange virtual conference** runs this Friday and Saturday (July 21-22). Also **online: produce safety training**, and a **webinar on combining solar energy and pollinator habitat** (both July 25).

In-person, you can **polish your environmental education skills** (Tulsa: early childhood July 24; elementary/middle school July 25), **learn to keep bees** (OKC, July 26) or attend the **Northern Nut Growers Association conference** (Columbia, MO, July 23-26).

Wherever you are, you can flex your citizen-science chops during **Moth Week** (July 22-30) and the **International Monarch Monitoring Blitz** (July 28 - Aug. 6).

Date	Event Name	Location	Time	Tickets
JUL 21 Fri	Seed Savers Exchange Virtual Conference @ online	online	Jul 21 - Jul 22 all-day	🔗 Tickets +
JUL 22 Sat	National Moth Week		Jul 22 - Jul 30 all-day	+
JUL 23 Sun	Northern Nut Growers Association Joint Conference @ Columbia, MO (University of Missouri)	Columbia, MO (University of Missouri)	Jul 23 - Jul 26 all-day	🔗 Tickets +
JUL 24 Mon	Early Childhood Environmental Education Workshop @ Tulsa (Chandler Park)	Tulsa (Chandler Park)	Jul 24 @ 1:00 pm - 4:30 pm	🔗 Tickets +
JUL 25 Tue	Elementary/Middle School Environmental Education Workshop @ Tulsa (Chandler Park)	Tulsa (Chandler Park)	Jul 25 @ 9:00 am - 3:30 pm	🔗 Tickets +
JUL 25 Tue	Solar Energy and Pollinator Habitat (MJV webinar) @ online	online	Jul 25 @ 1:00 pm - 2:00 pm	🔗 Tickets +
JUL 26 Wed	Beginning Beekeepers Workshop @ Oklahoma City (Oklahoma County OSU Extension Office)	Oklahoma City (Oklahoma County OSU Extension Office)	Jul 26 @ 9:00 am - 3:00 pm	+
JUL 28 Fri	International Monarch Monitoring Blitz		Jul 28 - Aug 6 all-day	+
JUL 28 Fri	OCM Food & Agriculture Conference @ Kansas City, MO (Marriott Kansas City Airport)	Kansas City, MO (Marriott Kansas City Airport)	Jul 28 - Jul 29 all-day	🔗 Tickets +
JUL 28 Fri	Full Sunflower Pots (workshop) @ Oklahoma City (Myriad Botanical Gardens)	Oklahoma City (Myriad Botanical Gardens)	Jul 28 @ 10:00 am - 11:00 am	🔗 Tickets +

The **Kerr Center's [tour](#) season continues**, with our **next one coming up August 8**. Tours are second Tuesdays, by appointment - [come visit us!](#)

That's only the next week's worth of sustainable agriculture educational activities, but it's all we could fit in this newsletter. For more, visit our constantly-updated 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.

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Contact Information

The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture
24456 Kerr Road
Poteau, OK 74953
Phone: 918.647.9123
Fax: 918.647.8712
mailbox@kerrcenter.com

