



# Field Notes

## Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture E-Newsletter

*E-Field Notes*

September 2023

**It's finally fall** - by both the calendar and the weather. What a relief!

Earlier this month, we put on our latest **elderberry workshop**. In case you missed it, David Redhage has a recap.

Fall is planting time for many cool-season cover crops. Most farmers who try them are convinced by their benefits - so much so that **most who start with cover crops for the government payments would keep cover cropping even without them!**

Speaking of planting, **the Forest Service has major reforestation projects on the drawing board - so big, it can't even find enough trees for them.**

While temperatures may have moderated, drought still lurks. **What are you doing to make sure your livestock have access to water? We've got some suggestions** from here on the ranch.

The cooler weather is nice, but another really cool thing is [your donations to support our work](#). [Thank you!](#)

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## President's Note: Elderberry Workshop Recap

On September 14, 2023, we held an [elderberry](#) workshop at the Kerr Center. It highlighted the elderberry grant we have been working on in conjunction with the University of Missouri.

While we have been working with elderberries for several years, sometimes it takes bringing in the public to give us a different perspective on the project. Several attendees commented on **how surprised they were that all of the varieties** in our genetic x environment trial **were the same species**.



I guess we have taken for granted how the varieties look. We know there are differences between the varieties; we work with them weekly. But it was not clear how different they are until someone new comes on site and sees the varieties together for the first time. When we were out on the research plots, I heard comments like, "These are all the same species?" and, "The plots look so different."

Attendees also saw what mite damage looked like on some of the plants. We have completed harvest, so there were no berries present. Andy Thomas from the University of Missouri spoke about the grant project and other research that has happened and will be happening in the future. Hopefully more work will be done on the potential health benefits of the elderberry.

**We are on the front end of expanding work on the elderberry, a native Oklahoma plant with a long history of use by humans worldwide.** While there is much work to be done, we hope the Kerr Center's contributions will help growers now and in the future.

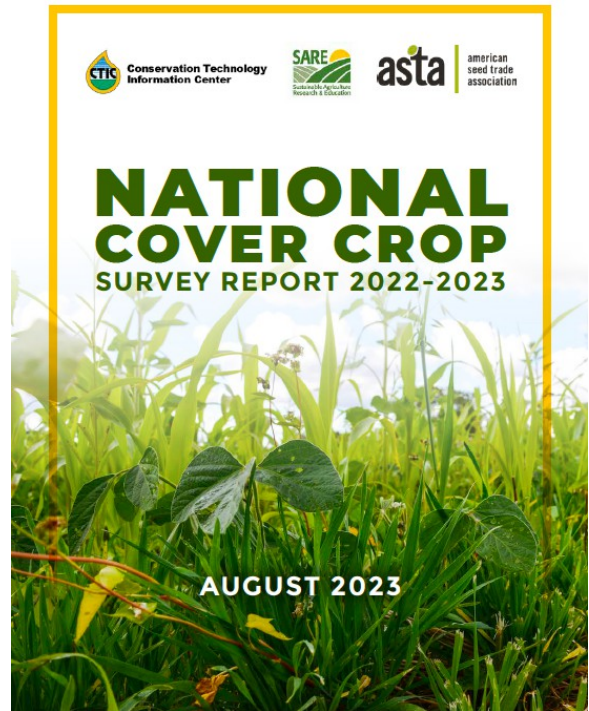
# Farmers Switch to Cover Crops for the Subsidies, Continue for the Benefits

Federal subsidies may help get farmers started using [cover crops](#) - but once they've adopted the practice, **the overwhelming majority find the benefits so great that they'd keep using cover crops even without the payments.**

That's a [key finding](#) from the latest annual [National Cover Crop Survey Report](#), released last month.

The conventional wisdom is that many farmers only use cover crops to be able to collect government subsidies for the practice. It's true that **nearly half of cover crop users do receive USDA payments** - and even more of the **farmers who don't use cover crops - 78% - say the payments could persuade them to start.**

However, according to the survey, **more than 90% of farmers using cover crops say they'd keep planting them even without the incentive payments.**



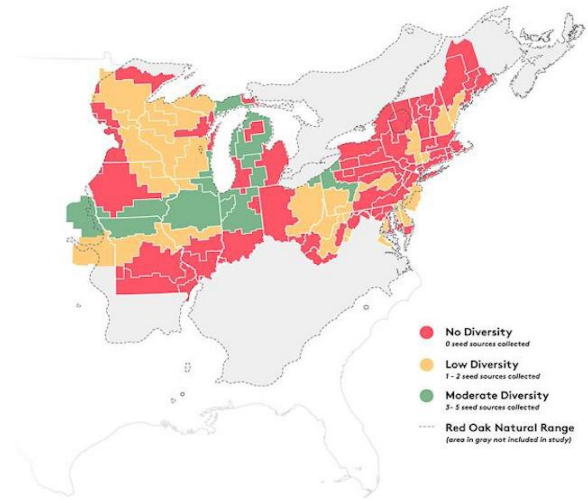
"Cover crop incentive payments are an important factor in encouraging and helping farmers to transition into cover cropping," says Dr. Rob Myers of SARE, lead researcher on the 2022-2023 National Cover Crop Survey Report. "But once they see the soil health improvements and other cover crop benefits, most stick with cover crop planting long after the incentives end."

You can learn much, much more about [cover crops](#) in the [horticulture section of our website](#) - including how they can [support beneficial insects](#), and even how they can be used to [convert bermudagrass pasture to crop fields](#).

# Forest Service Running out of Trees

The Forest Service is running out of trees. No, it hasn't cut them all down - it's **running out of trees to plant**.

Like so much else, **this all started because of climate change**. Lately some pretty far-out solutions to global warming have been getting press: Blow sun-blocking particles into the atmosphere? Launch a giant parasol into space? **One more down-to-earth solution** is also appealing in its simplicity: **plant more trees**.



**Planting trees to cool things down is a time-tested strategy**, at scales from the backyard through the cityscape on up to the global. It yields one of the biggest bangs for the climate-mitigating buck.

Recognizing that, **Congress passed the REPLANT Act in 2022, more than tripling the Forest Service's reforestation budget**.

**That ramps the total amount available up to an estimated \$123 million for the USDA to spend planting trees** all across the country. That's a lot of trees - over a billion, with a B, over the next ten years.

Yet even this seeming silver bullet has its own **pitfalls**. The biggest one? **There aren't enough trees to plant**. USDA has scoured the country to find enough, and come up short. Not only aren't there enough seedlings in the nation's nurseries, but **those that can be had aren't nearly a diverse enough mix**.

“The number of seedlings is a challenge,” says Peter Clark, a forest scientist at the University of Vermont, “but finding the diversity we need to restore ecologically complex forests—not just a few industrial workhorse species commonly used for commercial timber operations, like white pine—is an even bigger bottleneck.”

Clark recently co-authored a [study](#) that measured **just how big that shortfall is**. A team of 13 scientists studied 605 plant nurseries across twenty northern states. Only 56 of these grow and sell seedlings in the volumes needed for conservation and reforestation.

The nurseries in the study tended to maintain a limited inventory of a select few species, prioritizing those valued for commercial timber production over species required for conservation, ecological restoration, or climate adaptation. Moreover, many areas had no locally adapted tree stock available.

[What can be done?](#)

# Livestock Watering Strategies for the Next Drought

Sweating through August's "[flash drought](#)," many Oklahoma livestock keepers probably reviewed their [strategies for making sure their animals have enough water](#). That makes a reminder about one of our own favorite methods seem timely.

At key locations around the Kerr Center ranch, we have a number of [watering points made from old tractor tires](#). Making the tanks from this material re-uses something that would otherwise take up space in a landfill, but that's the least of the benefits.



The tires are half-buried, giving them **plenty of depth - which helps keep the water cool**. (It **also protects against freezes**, but that's a worry for another season.)

The "tire tanks'" depth also **keeps cattle from being able to reach the float valves** that supply them with water, lowering the chances that they'll get broken and cause costly leaks.

In the Kerr Center's case, our tractor-tire water tanks are also [gravity-fed](#) from ponds higher up in the landscape. That way, we don't have to run a pump to fill them.

**Keeping livestock supplied with ample, clean water** is essential for their survival during droughts like the one we've been going through. It's also a **powerful tool for pasture management year-round**. Studies have shown that **as long as cattle are within 800 feet of water, they graze more efficiently**, since they can spend more time eating grass and less time walking to and from water.

If you can keep a watering point within that distance no matter where cattle are on the spread, they'll graze it more evenly. Spread the watering points farther apart than that, and they'll overgraze the areas nearest water and leave the farther corners ungrazed - wasting forage on both ends.

The [livestock section](#) of our website has many free resources on the design and construction of watering systems for livestock. Our [YouTube channel](#) also has detailed videos explaining both the [preparation](#) and [installation](#) of tractor-tire watering tanks. (We've also got a [text version](#).) Check them out!

# Early Fall Events: Blue Thumb, Native Plants, Soil Health, Business Planning, Cattlewomen's College, Conferences....

You can get out and enjoy this young fall season by celebrating native plants at the Oklahoma Native Plant Network's **Fall Native Plant Festival** (Sept. 30, OKC).

Learn to monitor local streams as a **Blue Thumb volunteer** (Sept. 30 - Oct. 1, Enid), or get your ranching "degree" at the **Panhandle Cattlewomen's College** (Oct. 4-5, Beaver).

**Online**, you can begin courses on soil health or farm business planning (both starting Oct. 3).

Upcoming conferences include the **National Watershed Coalition** (Oct. 1-4, Salt Lake City, UT), the **state Master Gardeners meeting** (Oct. 5-6, El Reno), and the **Oklahoma Native Plant Society annual meeting** (Oct. 6-8, Hulbert).

Last but not least, **October is National Farm to School Month!**

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.

The screenshot shows a calendar interface with the following events:

- SEP 30 Sat:**
  - Blue Thumb Volunteer Training – Enid @ Enid (Autry Technology Center) [Tickets]
  - Oklahoma Native Plant Network Fall Native Plant Festival @ Oklahoma City (Oklahoma County Extension Center) [Tickets]
- OCT 1 Sun:**
  - National Farm to School Month (all-day)
  - National Watershed Coalition Annual Meeting @ Salt Lake City, UT [Tickets]
- OCT 3 Tue:**
  - Advanced Soil Health International Certificate Training Course (online) @ online [Tickets]
  - Farm Business Planning Course (online) @ online [Tickets]
- OCT 4 Wed:**
  - Panhandle Cattlewomen's College @ Beaver (Beaver County Fairgrounds)
- OCT 5 Thu:**
  - Oklahoma Master Gardener State Conference @ El Reno (Canadian Valley Technology Center) [Tickets]
- OCT 6 Fri:**
  - Oklahoma Native Plant Society Annual Meeting @ Hulbert (Sequoyah State Park)

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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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## 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](mailto:mailbox@kerrcenter.com)

