Field Notes

Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture E-Newsletter

E-Field Notes
April 2024

May Day! May Day! No, we don't have an emergency - it's just that May 1st is right around the corner, and the itch to get out growing and selling good food demands scratching.

In that vein, this month we're sharing a regenerative rancher's innovative approach to direct marketing meat, an updated ATTRA resource on organic blueberry production and marketing, and some solid numbers illustrating how improving soil health can also improve your bottom line.

But first, check out David Redhage's update on another tiny sign of the season - the frosted elfin butterfly.

Speaking of bottom lines - ours looks better when you **donate to the Kerr Center**. **Thank you!**

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President's Note: Frosted Elfin Butterfly

Over the last three years, the **Kerr Center Ranch was one of the survey sites** to determine the status of the **frosted elfin butterfly in Oklahoma**. The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife has posted an updated **report on the results of the surveys**.

The report covers some of the life cycle of the frosted elfin. It's not showy and doesn't receive the press coverage of the monarch. It is only visible for a brief period in the spring, but it does show the extreme diversity found in nature and how **we need to focus on the "little" things in nature to make sure we don't risk losing them**.

Developing a Meat CSA

Even with a stronger than average cattle market the past several months, **anything to increase the margins ranchers receive on their animals would be welcome news**. Many have turned to **marketing meat direct to the consumer** to achieve that.

Taking that idea a step further, one Wisconsin rancher started a **meat CSA**. He recently shared his experience and insights in a **webinar** hosted by Practical Farmers of Iowa.

CSA, or "community supported agriculture," is more common among direct-market produce operations. Customers sign up for an entire season, paying a fixed amount of money in advance for a set share of whatever is harvested each week throughout the season.

At Mastodon Valley Farm in southwestern Wisconsin, Peter Allen and his family have spent a decade **adapting the CSA approach to their direct-market sales of beef, pork, and chicken**.

A typical share might consist of a pound and a half of steaks or pork chops, three pounds of roast, four pounds of ground beef, and a pound each of sausage and bacon, but there's room to customize. A full share comes monthly, and a half share every month.

The CSA ships overnight within a four-state area, as well as delivering direct to major cities in the region.

The PFI webinar runs about an hour. The Mastodon Valley Farm **website** contains links to several other interviews and podcasts, as well as other information on their production and marketing approach.

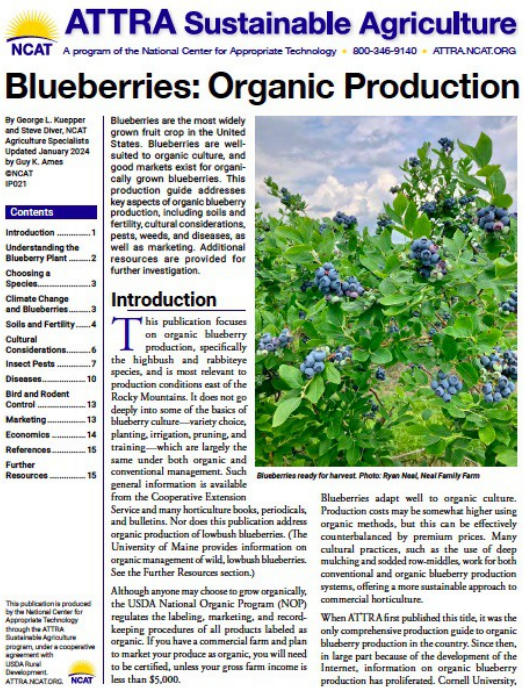
Organic Blueberry Production

The Kerr Center has worked with **blueberries** several times over the years, most recently in an [ongoing variety trial], aimed at evaluating which varieties and production methods are best suited to southeastern Oklahoma.

Results from that trial are forthcoming, but in the meantime, **ATTRA** has **updated** its **free guide to blueberry production, focusing specifically on organics**, with retired Kerr Center horticulture program manager, George Kuepper, as an author.

The 20-page guide is comprehensive, covering basic blueberry biology, species selection, soils and fertility, and pest and disease management - all under the general topic of production. Further sections address marketing and economic issues. In addition, an extensive bibliography includes references and links to further resources.

[Blueberries: Organic Production] is available free in html and pdf format from the ATTRA website.



ATTRA Sustainable Agriculture

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Blueberries: Organic Production

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Blueberries are the most widely grown fruit crop in the United States. Blueberries are well-suited to organic culture, and good markets exist for organically grown blueberries. This production guide addresses key aspects of organic blueberry production, including soils and fertility, cultural considerations, pests, weeds, and diseases, as well as marketing. Additional resources are provided for further investigation.

Introduction

This publication focuses on organic blueberry production, specifically the highbush and rabbiteye species, and is most relevant to production conditions east of the Rocky Mountains. It does not go deeply into some of the basics of blueberry culture—variety choice, planting, irrigation, pruning, and training—which are largely the same under both organic and conventional management. Such general information is available from the Cooperative Extension Service and many horticulture books, periodicals, and bulletins. Nor does this publication address organic production of lowbush blueberries. (The University of Maine provides information on organic management of wild, lowbush blueberries. See the Further Resources section.)

Although anyone may choose to grow organically, the USDA National Organic Program (NOP) regulates the labeling, marketing, and record-keeping procedures of all products labeled as organic. If you have a commercial farm and plan to market your produce as organic, you will need to be certified, unless your gross farm income is less than $5,000.

Blueberries ready for harvest. Photo: Ryan Neal, Neal Family Farm

Blueberries adapt well to organic culture. Production costs may be somewhat higher using organic methods, but this can be effectively counterbalanced by premium prices. Many cultural practices, such as the use of deep mulching and sodded row-middles, work for both conventional and organic blueberry production systems, offering a more sustainable approach to commercial horticulture.

When ATTRA first published this title, it was the only comprehensive production guide to organic blueberry production in the country. Since then, in large part because of the development of the Internet, information on organic blueberry production has proliferated. Cornell University,

Soil Health Management Boosts Income

Soil health management practices raised net per-acre income by an average of $65 per acre. So found a recent study of 30 farms across the U.S., growing 14 different crops.

The Soil Health Institute partnered with the National Association of Conservation Districts to conduct the study. In **20 different states**, it interviewed farmers who had successfully implemented soil health management systems, and **analyzed their budgets before and after** the start of the practices to figure the impact on the bottom line.

Table 1. Partial Budget[1] Analysis, 30 Years with a Soil Health Management System on a 3,000-Acre Farm, $ per Acre per Year (2019 Dollars).

	Soybean		Grain Sorghum	
	BENEFITS	COSTS	BENEFITS	COSTS
Expense Category	REDUCED EXPENSE	ADDITIONAL EXPENSE	REDUCED EXPENSE	ADDITIONAL EXPENSE
Seed	0.00	0.00	0.00	20.00
Fertilizer & Amendments	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Pesticides	18.00	34.50	0.00	0.00
Fuel & Electricity	4.82	1.65	4.51	2.41
Labor & Services	10.34	6.31	9.21	7.59
Equipment Ownership	22.78	12.15	20.21	12.92
Total Expense Change	**55.94**	**54.61**	**33.93**	**42.92**
	ADDITIONAL REVENUE	REDUCED REVENUE	ADDITIONAL REVENUE	REDUCED REVENUE
Yield, bu	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Price Received,[2] $/bu.	10.00	10.00	3.90	3.90
Grazing	00.00	00.00	27.50	0.00
Revenue Change	**00.00**	**0.00**	**27.50**	**0.00**
	TOTAL BENEFITS	TOTAL COSTS	TOTAL BENEFITS	TOTAL COSTS
Total Change	55.94	54.61	61.43	42.92
Change in Net Farm Income	1.33		18.51	

While s**oil health management practices are promoted for a variety of environmental benefits**, the study found that **there are sound economic reasons for farmers to adopt them as well**. Across all farms in the study, implementing **soil health management practices saved producers money**: $14 an acre for corn, $7 an acre for soybeans, and $16 an acre on all other crops taken together.

In addition, **many practices, like grazing cover crops, add additional income on top of those savings**.

The farmers interviewed used a variety of different practices, and in the interviews, many of them emphasized that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, they encouraged new adopters to start small and find practices that work for their own particular circumstances.

The one **Oklahoma farmer** interviewed for the study, Rick Jeans, farms 3,000 acres in Kay County, raising mainly soybean and milo. Jeans switched to no-till 30 years ago, and added cover crops around 2013.

As a result, the study found, Jeans' **income on soybeans increased by $1.33 an acre. On milo? $18.51 per acre**.

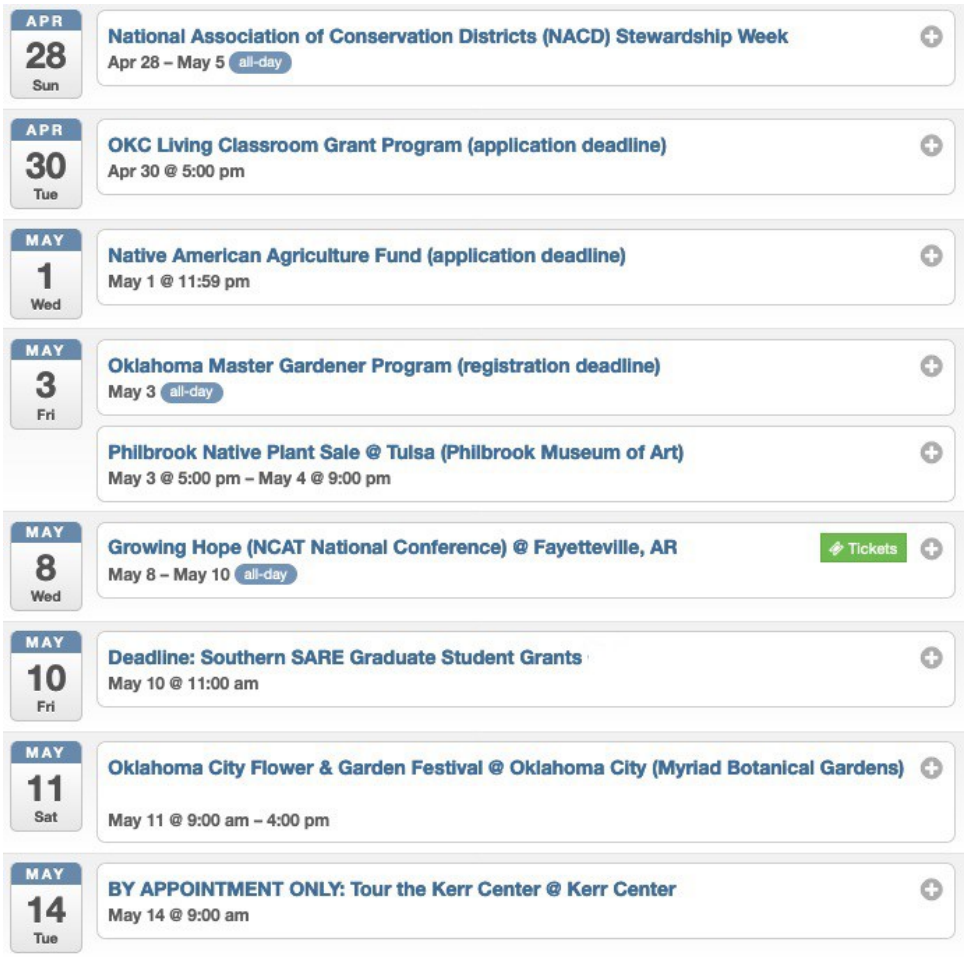
“I think what’s benefited me more than anything was getting the water in the soil,” says Jeans. “The infiltration has improved drastically.”

A **full report, along with fact sheets, videos, and resources**, is available from the Soil Health Institute website.

Spring Events: Stewardship Week; Master Gardener; Native Plants; NCAT Conference; Grants....

It's **Stewardship Week**! There's also still time to sign up for this year's **Master Gardener class** (May 3).

NCAT's national conference, "Growing Hope," is May 8-10 in Fayetteville, AR. If you feel like celebrating native plants, check out the **Philbrook Native Plant Sale** in Tulsa (May 3-4), or the **OKC Flower & Garden Festival** (May 11).



Upcoming **grant application deadlines** include:

- **OKC Living Classroom Grant Program** (Apr. 30)
- **Native American Agriculture Fund** (May 1)
- **Southern SARE Graduate Student Grants** (May 10)

Also, don't forget that **it's tour season at the Kerr Center - book yours today!**

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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