

# the PRACTICAL FARMER

AUTUMN 2023



*In This Issue:*

Thinking Globally,  
Growing Locally

A Milky Way

Cultivating Diversity in  
the Heart of Waterloo





Joe Merten leads the group during the field day he hosted on his farm near Austin, Minnesota, on Aug. 10. Through partnerships with Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever and other organizations, Joe and his family have added habitat to environmentally sensitive areas throughout their row crop operation using precision conservation.

Read about another farmer's experience with precision conservation on page 28.



## FEATURES

- 6 FIELD CROPS**  
**Cultivating Diversity in the Heart of Waterloo**  
Since the 1980s, Mike Cook and his family have worked to build a profitable business growing row crops, fruits and vegetables on a patchwork of smaller plots.
- 8 HORTICULTURE**  
**The Richness of Varieties**  
In a modern market environment where crunch is key, what is the value of heirloom apple varieties?
- 10 LIVESTOCK**  
**A Milky Way**  
Facing a tough dairy market, three small-scale Iowa dairies have adapted their businesses to keep doing what they love.
- 13 BEGINNING FARMERS**  
**Thinking Globally, Growing Locally**  
Global Food Project's incubator farm helps immigrants to Iowa City build community while preserving cultural ties and traditions.
- 16 FIELD DAY PHOTOS**  
**2023 Field Day Season**  
See images of learning, connection, food and fun from the first half of our 2023 field day season.
- 24 MEMBERSHIP**  
**The Cycle Continues**  
Longtime PFI members Steve and Sara Hopkins are innovators in regenerative farming, water conservation and youth education.
- 26 FIELD CROPS**  
**Ventures in Organic**  
The Miller and Olson families are at different stages of their organic farming experience, but their stories highlight some common challenges and sources of support.
- 28 HABITAT**  
**Creating a House for Nature**  
Ken Fawcett and his family have embraced precision conservation to improve their farm while making space for the rest of nature to thrive.

## DEPARTMENTS

- 5 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NOTE**
- 30 MEMBER PHOTOS**
- 32 MEMBER BOOK REVIEW**  
"Tending Iowa's Land"  
edited by Cornelia Mutel  
Reviewed by Carol Smith
- 33 NEW MEMBERS**
- 34 PFI NEWS**
- 36 CALENDAR**
- 38 JOIN PFI**



### ON THE COVER:

Blandine Matondo tends to her garden at the Global Food Project in Iowa City, Iowa. She and four other Congolese families have their own vegetable plots to grow food for their families and the community. Read more about her and the Global Food Project on page 13.



## WHAT WE DO

Practical Farmers of Iowa was founded in 1985 as an organization for farmers. We use farmer-led investigation and information sharing to help farmers practice an agriculture that benefits both the land and people.

## OUR MISSION

Practical Farmers of Iowa's mission is equipping farmers to build resilient farms and communities.

## OUR VISION

An Iowa with healthy soil, healthy food, clean air, clean water, resilient farms and vibrant communities.

## OUR VALUES

Welcoming everyone

Farmers leading the exchange of experience and knowledge

Curiosity, creativity, collaboration and community

Resilient farms now and for future generations

Stewardship of land and resources

## THE PRACTICAL FARMER

the Practical Farmer is published quarterly as a benefit of membership to help keep farmers and friends of farmers in touch with one another through informative articles on relevant farming topics, current on-farm research, upcoming events and other news of interest.

**Magazine Editor:** Tamsyn Jones

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# Celebrating Staff Milestones

**Practical Farmers is farmer-centric.** You will see this threaded throughout our work – from this magazine, full of farmer experiences and stories, to our events, to our program design. This farmer focus is one of our core values, and it’s integral to our relevance and impact.

Since our founding, PFI and its members have also strongly valued building relationships and community – both among one another and with PFI staff. Many of you have come to know individual PFI staff members you regularly work with. If you’ve called the office, you’ve likely talked with someone from our friendly membership team – Debra Boekholder, Steve Carlson, Emma Liddle or Kyleigh Meyeres. With our rapid growth the past couple of years, however, our staff size has significantly expanded. We’ve added new departments and grown existing ones – and we know it can be hard to keep up.

In our most recent member survey, as well as in conversations I’ve had, many of you have expressed a desire to know more about our staff – who we all are and what we do. We hear your interest – and we plan to share more updates about office life and PFI staff going forward. In the meantime, as fall turns into winter and you have time to do more reading, I encourage you to look at the staff profiles on our website. As of this writing, we are up to 40-some staff! My colleagues are all talented, hardworking, mission-driven individuals. They also lead full lives outside of PFI. As part of our commitment to helping you better know the staff who are here to serve you, here are some personal milestones a few have experienced this past summer.

**Alisha Bower**, PFI’s senior operations director, lives in Ames, Iowa, with her husband, Allen Chen, and their dog, Scout. Alisha has been at PFI since January 2017. She is an integral part of making sure we have the people, processes and money to do our work. This past year, Alisha led our transition to new finance software during some finance staff turnover. This was a huge task, and she did so while helping lead PFI’s transition to other technology platforms, including new member software, and carrying out other integral duties. Alisha and Allen got married in July. Here is a photo from their Wisconsin wedding.



Photo courtesy of Maganda Photography

**Lydia English**, PFI’s field crops viability manager, joined PFI in June 2020. Lydia, who lives in Ames, is overseeing PFI’s growing cover crop and small grains cost-share programs. In the year ahead, she will lead our efforts to help farmers plant more than 500,000 acres of cover crops and 35,000 acres of small grains with support from PFI’s cost-share. She and her partner, David Delaney, just had a baby in late July. Meet Lydia and David’s son, Arlo.



**Liz Kolbe**, PFI’s senior farmer-led education manager, lives in Ames with her husband, David Walker, and their cat, Jack Pumpkinhead. Liz has had several roles at PFI since she started a decade ago in July 2013. In her present role, she has successfully hired and grown the farmer-led education team over the past year and a half. Staff and members alike appreciate Liz’s deep understanding of what “farmer-led” means, and how she has delivered farmer-led education offerings. Liz and David also got married this past July. Here is a photo of their Grinnell, Iowa, wedding.



Photo courtesy of Kristland Lee Photography

As PFI grows, we’ll continue to feature farmers predominantly. But we’ll also continue to sprinkle in snapshots of staff, what they’re working on and what they’re up to outside of work, to help you better know the wonderful team we have.

Thanks for being part of this welcoming and caring network.

*Sally Worley*

# Cultivating Diversity in the **Heart** of Waterloo

Since the 1980s, Mike Cook and his family have worked to build a profitable business growing row crops, fruits and vegetables on a patchwork of smaller plots

By Taylor Hintch

**Engineer and farmer Mike Cook has taken his career to immense heights but has always stayed grounded in the soils of Black Hawk County, Iowa.**

A third-generation farmer, Mike's grandfather, McKinley Cook, moved to Waterloo in 1925 and farmed in addition to working for the Illinois Central Railroad for 50 years. Around 1950, He sold about 10 acres to Mike's dad, Mack, which Mack farmed on the side while working as a machinist for John Deere in Waterloo.

Mike's path first took him to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where he received his bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from Southern University and A&M College, a historically Black land-grant university, in 1980. He later went on to receive his master's degree in industrial technology at the University of Northern Iowa. In the early 1990s, while working on his master's degree, Mike also published research on hazardous waste disposal as part of a NASA fellowship he received.

Like his dad, Mike's career then led him to John Deere, where he worked as an engineer for the first 15 years and then rose through the company. When he retired after 30 years, he held an upper management position and he holds three patents from his time there. But farming was never far away.

"Farming is dynamic," Mike says. "There is always such variation in what you are going to be doing. There is always something to learn."

Mike planted his first sweet corn in 1985, adding other produce that he and his family – including his wife, Liz Cook, and



daughters Nicole and Kristina – sold locally. When his dad was looking to stop farming in the mid-1980s, Mike was just thinking of expanding. He took over his dad's acres and continued to farm both row crops and produce on the side throughout his engineering career.

In 2008, Mike retired from John Deere and began teaching (he currently teaches an advanced manufacturing course on the TechWorks Campus in Waterloo). Mike now operates a highly diversified farm on 120 acres at Cook Family Farm, where he raises corn and soybeans along with a wide variety of fruit and vegetable crops. The farm is spread over 14 tracts of land across the Waterloo area. Some are parcels Mike's grandfather and father bought, but many are new additions he and Liz have purchased. Managing many small plots requires good record-keeping, but Mike isn't phased. Instead, he sees them as land access opportunities.

"That's the thing," he says. "Your average farmer isn't going to want to get out here with all these trees, or farm in town with the Dollar General right across the street."

## Building the Business

When Mike first got back into farming, he says the business was not initially profitable. But now he and Liz have learned more and are always evaluating how their farm enterprises are performing. Liz is the farm's accountant, and Mike credits her



Mike's soybean field across from the Dollar General Store in Waterloo.

with keeping the business profitable and advising business decisions.

Of all his farm enterprises, his stand at the Waterloo Urban Farmers Market is one of his favorites. “I call it the ATM because the more vegetables you pick, the more they continue to bear,” Mike says. “You have to work for it.” He sells everything from green tomatoes, potatoes and zucchini to tender greens, okra and Crenshaw melons. The market stand is so popular, Mike often sells out of produce. A crowd favorite is Cook Family Farm’s early-maturity ‘Silver Queen’ sweet corn. In addition to standard summer vegetables, the Cooks also sell apples, pears, plums and their Concord grapes straight from the vine.

Corn is Mike’s favorite crop to grow, but he says he’s had to learn about growing row crops. One challenge has been finding people he could trust to advise him on inputs and pricing. In the past, Mike says businesses pushed extra fertilizer, hiked the prices and did not have his best interest in mind. Now, thanks to relationships with neighbors, who often drive by and check on his crops, and farmers like Shaffer Ridgeway, who farms with his family at Southern Goods and Grazin’ Cattle in Waterloo (and also serves on PFI’s board of directors), Mike is in a better place. “If it were not for Shaffer, I would not be farming,” Mike says. “He recommended an agronomist that helped cut my inputs by 40%.”

He also credits Bob Recker, a longtime friend, farmer and fellow former John Deere engineer. “You can’t be afraid to ask how to make it [as a farmer],” Mike says. “I’ve asked the people I farm with, point-blank, how they are making money.” He has also learned valuable lessons about how to wisely spend money. “Early on, I bought cheap seed,” Mike recounts. “When I talked to my neighbor, he said don’t save money on seed. Save it somewhere else, because you get what you paid for.”

Several years ago, Mike switched to no-till, and two years ago, he started adding cover crops to some acres. He has reduced his nitrogen use, and this fall, Mike plans to expand cover crops to all his row crop acres. On some acres, he’s also experimenting with wide-row corn, a practice that lets him plant crops like squash, turnips and cucumbers, among others, in the space between corn rows.

For these efforts – along with a commitment to mentoring others – Mike and his family received the Iowa Farm Environmental Leader Award at the 2023 Iowa State Fair.

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*“Farming is dynamic. There is always such variation in what you are going to be doing.*

*There is always something to learn.”*

**– Mike Cook**

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Bob Recker and Mike Cook

## Growing the Farm Into the Future

As he looks to the future, Mike hopes to expand the farm. He’d like to stay closer to his home base, but says buying land hasn’t been easy. In the past, he’s bought land from neighbors and at land auctions. But information on available land isn’t always easy to find, and it can get snapped up quickly. Recently, land near Mike’s home came up for sale but he didn’t get the chance to make an offer before it had sold.

He has also faced outright discrimination as a Black farmer. Mike recalls one land auction that was particularly disturbing. “I had the place bought at \$16,000 and the auctioneer stopped the auction and said, ‘All right guys, I’m going to go around one more time and if you don’t bid, this guy right here is going to get a good deal,’” he recounts, noting how the auctioneer had pointed at him. Bidding resumed, and at \$25,000 another interested party stopped and talked with Mike. They struck a deal, and Mike ultimately got the parcel for \$25,000 while the other farmer bought \$400,000 of land that day.

The strange encounter didn’t stop there. Mike says the auctioneer demanded to know, in front of everyone, how Mike planned to pay for the land. “I said I intend to pay with a check, and the auctioneer said, ‘I’ll take that check.’ But the man that just bought \$400,000 worth of farm ground was not asked the same question in front of everyone, nor was he expected to hand over a check on the spot.”

It was clear to Mike that he was being treated differently because of his race. He also acknowledges that structural barriers exist for him as a Black farmer. In this instance, Mike was singled out and nearly lost the opportunity to purchase land. But he points to broader challenges he’s faced, from the attitudes of some bankers and service providers to finding information. “There is so much we as Black farmers don’t know,” Mike says. “So much information is withheld.”

Despite these barriers, Mike plans to continue accruing land and carving out space for himself as a farmer in Black Hawk County. Nicole, Mike’s eldest daughter, works as a realtor in both Iowa and Illinois, and his youngest daughter, Kristina, currently works as a pediatrician in Waterloo. He hopes they may work together to manage the farm and continue his farming legacy. ■

# The Richness of Varieties

*In a modern market environment where crunch is key, what is the value of heirloom apple varieties?*

By Jacqueline Venner Senske

**Apples are astonishingly diverse. In “The Illustrated History of Apples in the United States and Canada,” apple historian Dan Bussey documents more than 16,000 unique varieties that were grown at one time in those two countries alone.**

Most of these are now lost – but around 2,500 known varieties are still grown in the U.S, according to University of Illinois Extension. Many are heirloom varieties specific to a particular region or locale; a much smaller number enjoy widespread commercial success. These are the varieties more familiar to consumers – names like Gala, Red Delicious, Honeycrisp, Granny Smith and Fuji.

They owe their success, in part, to having certain attributes favored by modern consumers, like color, shape, shelf life and texture (hint: crunch is key). The economics of apple production are a big factor in determining which apples rise to prominence – variety selection can be a make-or-break decision for apple growers, But Lindsay Lee, an apple grower in the Decorah, Iowa, area, says heirloom varieties have a lot to offer.

“There is so much diversity in the apple genus,” he says. “There are flavor issues that leave some old varieties lacking, but others have a lot to offer in flavor, pest and disease resistance. Modern breeding pulls from heirloom genetics to introduce those characteristics, but sometimes those gains for some traits come at the expense of other characteristics, like flavor.”

He points to russet apples as an example, a term used to describe apples that develop rough, brown patches on the skin. Some varieties, such as Golden Russet, commonly develop this harmless

skin defect, though any variety may show russetting under certain conditions. “The market has left them behind because they’re not a pretty red apple. They have a rougher skin and streaked color, but to me, they have the best flavors of any apples. They’re floral and spicy.”



*Roxbury Russet (Photo by Mike Malik)*

Lindy, as he is called by his friends, has been working with and growing apples for more than 30 years. Recently retired, he worked years ago with PFI member David Sliwa, another Decorah-area fruit grower, to establish the original collection of heirloom apples at Seed Savers Exchange in 1989. At the time it was planted, Lindsay says the collection “focused on pre-1950 varieties with the goal of maintaining a living collection of genetic material for northern and Midwest varieties.”

## **What’s in a Name?**

One of the varieties preserved at Seed Savers is the ancestor of today’s Red

Delicious apples. Known today for its ubiquity and iconic color, this now oft-panned apple was once an accidental Iowa heirloom celebrated for its flavor and crispness. It was first discovered in the 1870s by a farmer named Jesse Hiatt, who noticed a rogue apple tree in his Peru, Iowa, orchard. After a couple of thwarted attempts to remove it (the tree kept growing back), he left it to grow.

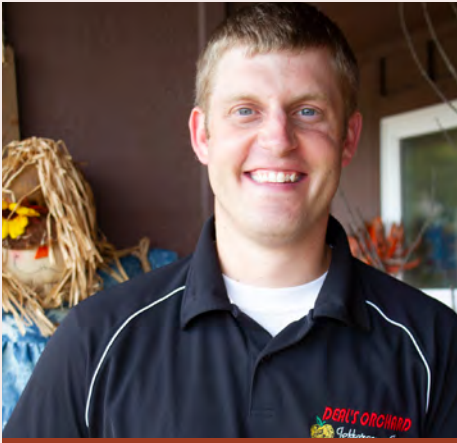
When it bore fruit, he was delighted by the taste. He named the apple Hawkeye and entered it into a competition sponsored by Stark Bro’s Nurseries & Orchards in 1893, which catapulted it to almost instant apple stardom. Stark Bro’s purchased the rights to Hawkeye and began commercializing it, eventually renaming it Red Delicious.

Over the years, however, breeders continued to tinker with the apple. The variety whose remarkable flavor had, by the 1940s, made it the best-selling apple in the U.S. was eventually engineered for deep-red looks, a pointier shape and a tough skin that could withstand shipping. Flavor was traded for cosmetics, the unwitting victim of the apple’s popularity.

But without some curb appeal in the produce section, how is an apple to attract consumers?

To Lindsay and other heirloom apple enthusiasts, the flavor is the argument. “I’ll take a bag of 30 different varieties to classes I teach, and I’ll ask the students





Chris Deal

*“There is so much diversity in the apple genus. There are flavor issues that leave some old varieties lacking, but others have a lot to offer in flavor, pest and disease resistance.”*

**- Lindsay Lee**



Deal's Orchard in Jefferson.

to taste them and identify the flavor characteristics,” Lindsay says. “I’ll put modern varieties into that mix, and the students will just not be interested in them because their flavor just doesn’t match up.”

### The Business of Apples

For Red Delicious, loss of flavor didn’t hamper its commercial success. It remained the U.S.’s top-selling apple until 2018, though its decline, driven by growing dissatisfaction, started in the early 1990s. It was around that time that a new cultivar, Honeycrisp, came on the apple scene.

The fruit of a painstaking 30-year breeding process at the University of Minnesota, Honeycrisp represented a real inflection point in the apple industry. At a microscopic level, the cultivar boasts cells twice the size of older varieties, giving Honeycrisp a crunch that was previously unparalleled. “Before Honeycrisp, it was a race to the bottom in terms of price across the industry,” says PFI member Chris Deal. He and his brother Benji Deal are the fourth generation to grow up at Deal’s Orchard near Jefferson, Iowa, where the family raises over 40 acres of apples, including many newer varieties.

As a patented apple, Honeycrisp commands a higher price at the store. It also ushered in the era of club apples, also known as managed varieties. These apples are proprietary varieties that are licensed, developed and patented as intellectual property. Growers must pay membership fees, royalties per tree in production and other related expenses

for the privilege of accessing markets with these apples. In some cases, production is restricted to an area for the first 20 years of commercial introduction.

“Today, Honeycrisp is a parent of most new varieties,” says Bill Dodd, president of the Midwest Apple Improvement Association, a grower cooperative that seeks to produce apples suited to Midwestern production that can compete with other club apples. Recent MAIA introductions include EverCrisp and Ludacrisp. These club apples are on trend, boasting a snappy crunch. Ludacrisp also has a flavor reminiscent of Juicy Fruit gum.

### The Value of Diversity

At Deal’s Orchard, however, some increasingly rare, older varieties still grow alongside newer ones. These heirlooms continue to produce reliably and are valued for more than just their market appeal or economic contributions. One such apple is Lodi, a variety first introduced by the New York Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, New York, in 1924.

Chris says they’re the first apples of the season, “reliable producers” that are ready for harvest as early as late July. He appreciates the early-season marketing opportunity these summer apples provide. Benji, however, is more lukewarm, citing how the pale yellow, soft-textured Lodis don’t meet many customers’ flavor and texture expectations.

The brothers’ difference of opinion highlights some of the many factors

involved in selecting apple varieties. Growers must weigh their finances, orchard size and customer base alongside a host of other considerations. Decisions about which varieties have value – or don’t – vary from orchard to orchard, and can be quite personal.

For some apple growers, having a range of varieties and products can help distribute risk. This is the case for Deal’s Orchard, which raises a mix of modern and heirloom varieties. Some apples produce better some years, Chris says, while other varieties will flourish in a different year. Pressing the fruit into juice, making apple-laden baked goods and even further processing juice into hard cider – as the Deals do – can also make better use of the produce they grow and broaden their income.

But for the Deal family, heirloom apples also have value that’s harder to quantify. “Economically, would we be okay if we raised just 10 varieties?” Chris says. “Yeah, probably. But I don’t want to do that. There is value in having more genetic diversity. And there is just something valuable about those old varieties.

“It’s a little sentimental and a connection to the past, to memories. You know, we still have folks who will drive three hours to buy the first Lodi apples of the year, and we like to see them and sell them our apples.”

In that way, choosing apple varieties from among the avalanche of options isn’t just about the horticulture or the economics; it’s also about community. ■



The Thicke's farmland from above.

# A Milky Way

By Amos Johnson

Facing a tough dairy market, three small-scale Iowa dairies have adapted their businesses to keep doing what they love



**Light is just beginning to spill onto the horizon when Blake Hansen goes out to the dairy barn. The cows get milked at 4 a.m., just as they have ever since he was a child growing up at Hansen's Dairy, the farm his family has worked for 150 years outside Hudson, Iowa.**

This early-morning routine is a common scene that plays out on dairy farms across Iowa and the country. What sets Blake's morning apart from most is that after milking the cows, he can walk past the frothing bulk tank and into the on-farm creamery processing the day's milk.

As a country singer provides the day's soundtrack from the corner radio, milk moves through a forest of stainless-steel pipes, to be turned into ice cream. Today, it's ice cream, but tomorrow it might be butter, or even cheese curds. While the farm has gone through generations of Hansens, this processing room is the innovation of Blake and his three brothers, Blair, Brad and Brent.

Until 2004, the Hansens sold milk to their local co-op as they always had. But then Blake's parents, Jay and Jeanne, decided it was time to step back from the business. "My parents called me and said, 'We're tired. We're selling the cows,' and I said, 'No you're not, I'm coming home!'" Blake says. His brothers wanted to come back to the farm too. But the operation wasn't big enough to support five families. To make space for everyone, they had to capture more of their milk's value.

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**"Dairy farmers are used to working with cows and milking equipment. But when you get into processing, it is a whole new world of equipment. Just keeping everything working is a challenge."**

**- Francis Thicke**

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"It's tough to make a living milking cows. The price of inputs is high and the price of milk is not, and it continues to decline," Blake says. "It was either sell [the milk] to the co-op or sell it ourselves." The family opted for the latter. Direct-marketing requires more work, but Blake says it lets them "get paid more for our hard work." Now each brother oversees a part of the business: Blake milks and cares for the herd while Blair manages the crops and cow nutrition. Brad is in charge of creamery operations and Brent delivers the finished dairy products.

## Adding Complexity

Allowing family to join in and continue farming is what motivated Tom Weighner to start WW Homestead Dairy near Waukon, Iowa, with his brother and a neighboring farmer in 2011. The two farms had been running small-scale dairies for years. Faced with the increasingly tough dairy market,

however, they were finding it harder to survive. For a few years, the neighbors had kicked around the idea of joining forces to differentiate themselves with value-added dairy products, rather than scaling up or caving to industrializing pressures. Then came the Great Recession of 2007-2009.

"In 2009, a hundred-cow dairy would have lost \$100,000 in equity with the price of milk that year," Tom says. "We decided if we wanted to keep dairy farming, we'd have to try something a little different." In 2011, the Weighners and their neighbor, Tom Wallaser, pooled resources to buy a local vacant building and started their new dairy, with its focus on value-added products and community engagement.

The new dairy is doing well, but the obstacles Tom and his neighbor faced before merging aren't unique. The difficulty of keeping a dairy farm running is evident in nationwide numbers. Since the 1940s, the number of farms with dairy cows has dropped by 97%. Many farms had some dairy cows as part of a diversified operation, but as livestock left the land and farms became more specialized dairying consolidated. Now, more than half of all dairy cows live on operations with 1,000 or more cows.

Francis Thicke, who operates a grass-fed, organic dairy in Fairfield, Iowa, and has been connected to the industry since the 1950s, has observed this decline first-hand. “Many years ago, there was smaller-scale [dairy] processing,” he says, recalling how dairies used to be commonplace. “Then the big industrial scale came in. They were competing on price and they didn’t differentiate, but you just couldn’t compete and win against that big scale.” As fewer farms produced milk, local creameries disappeared – along with the jobs they supported.

This local dairy economy is evident at WW Homestead Creamery. Located in an old factory building that sat empty for years, activity is bustling. Tanker trucks pull in while delivery trucks pull out. Through the windows in the viewing hallway that’s open for visitors, employees are seen cutting freshly made curds. These jobs – the dairy now employs more than 25 people – help strengthen Waukon’s local economy, but that doesn’t mean the work is easy.

Making value-added products and managing a creamery add unique challenges to the already hard work of running a farm. “Distribution has caused more than one headache,” Tom says. “If you’ve got perishables on a truck and it breaks down 80 miles away, that’s an issue!”

Francis knows all about the headaches more machines bring. In June, the boiler that pasteurizes the milk stopped working. Repairing it on his hands and knees, Francis sang “come on baby, light my fire,” a line from the famous The Doors song, as he used a blowtorch to jerry-rig it back to working. “Dairy farmers are used to working with cows and milking equipment,” Francis says. “But when you get into processing, it is a whole new world of equipment. Just keeping everything working is a challenge.”

Francis and his wife, Susan Thicke, have been processing the milk from their herd of Jersey cows since 1992. At the time their farm, Radiance Dairy, was the only dairy in Iowa selling milk under its own label. Since then, more dairies have tried that approach. An Iowa dairy pioneer, Francis figured out how to make an on-farm creamery work in the state. Then, in the spirit of PFI knowledge-sharing, he passed on what he learned to others.

Today, a direct line of knowledge can be traced from Radiance to Hansen’s to WW Homestead, each learning from the one that came before. Tom is grateful for that openness. “They offered practical knowledge that the consultants just couldn’t give us,” he says of the Hansens. He doesn’t see the need for competition between any of the private-label dairies in Iowa. “There’s more than enough room for all of us.”

*(Continued on page 12 →)*



*Jordan and Blake Hansen*



*Ice cream at WW Homestead Dairy.*



*Francis Thicke of Radiance Dairy, carrying a calf.*



A calf at Hansen's Dairy.

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Kids drinking milk at WW Homestead Dairy.

## Specialty Price for Specialty Products

While the number of cows in the U.S. has declined by half, today's cows are producing four times as much milk as 80 years ago. This glut in production, however, is being met with declining milk sales. The reasons for this are many: shifting consumer dining habits, lifestyle changes and the proliferation of more convenient and trendy grab-and-go drinks, among others.

Because of this decline, value-added products can be a lifeline for a dairy farm's sales. Ice cream, butter and cheese often have stronger consumer demand than the milk from which they're made. Radiance Dairy, Hansen's Dairy and WW Homestead Dairy all rely on value-added products to buffer other market challenges. But it can be difficult to manage supply. "The hardest thing about it is finding a balance in the products," says Jordan Hansen, Blake's wife. "How do we take 3,000 gallons of milk and find the most effective blend of uses?"

Often it comes down to seasonality of sales. In the summer, Hansen's Dairy doesn't make much butter, she says, because the focus is on ice cream. "In the winter, ice cream sales slow down so we make a lot more butter." Marketing the products is another major barrier. "Technically, anyone can set up a creamery and make things, but then you have to find people to buy it," Jordan says. "That's the challenge."

All three dairies rely heavily on word of mouth and individual connections with customers. While priced higher than conventional dairy products, their customers are willing to pay to support local agriculture and quality products. Francis says his customer base is concerned about animal welfare, the nutritive value of his products and supporting local farms. "Nowadays, people are more interested in where their food is coming from," he says. "It's clear you have to have a specialty product and you have to get a specialty price for it. We're just not even competing with the industrial system."

Francis' Jersey cows come to greet him as he visits their pasture. It's about time to milk, but the cows are slow to follow. They're more than content in the tall grass starting to take off from the recent rains. "They'll come when they're ready. They know the drill," Francis says driving back up to the barn.

Sure enough, 10 minutes later the cattle are lowing as they come up the hill to the farm. They'll be milked by the new farm manager, who does the day-to-day milking now that Francis is starting to hand the reins over to the next generation. Tonight, Francis is playing jazz trumpet in town, the audience full of people who will buy his milk tomorrow. ■

# THINKING GLOBALLY, GROWING LOCALLY

*Global Food Project's incubator farm helps immigrants to Iowa City build community while preserving cultural ties and traditions*

By Rachel Burke



**It's a sunny day at the Global Food Project gardens in Iowa City, Iowa, and Emmanuel Gauthier Mfuankatu is showing off the plot of land where, for the past two years, he has been raising food following Congolese traditions. "Here, I am learning, and I am teaching, using my body and being in the natural world," Emmanuel says.**

Originally from the town of Mbanza-Ngungu in Congo Kinshasa, a name often used to refer to the Democratic Republic of Congo, he immigrated to Iowa City in 2016. In Congo, he earned a bachelor's degree in history and social science – and his love of history and community is evident in the way he grows food. "Everything I am doing here I learned in my home country," he says.

Emmanuel's mother, Marie Sungudulu Lukenga, spent her days farming a couple of hours outside of Kinshasa, Congo's capital city. She grew nearly all her family's produce, sold produce at market and taught her son how to farm the Congolese way. Emmanuel now happily shares the legacy of his mother's wisdom with his community at Global Food Project.

The project was founded in 2016 by a group of Iowa City residents who believed that sharing space to grow food could help build community between newly arrived and established residents, and thus "to make a more inclusive and interconnected Iowa City." To work towards this goal, Global Food Project leases land from the Johnson County Historic Poor Farm and divides that land into plots for interested growers.

In its first years, the effort was managed entirely by citizens who believed in the project's mission. Interest in the plots quickly grew, and by 2020, it was clear more resources and management were needed. Iowa City Compassion, a nonprofit offering immigration and legal services, took over the task and in 2021 hired a manager to oversee the garden space, assist growers and manage demand. As of the 2023 growing season, 55

families farm at GFP. Most are new arrivals to Iowa from Congo, Sudan, Mexico and Central American nations, among others.

As an incubator space, GFP provides these growers with water, tools, plants, education and access to a pack shed and greenhouse. Two types of plots are available: a 13-by-30-foot family plot and a one-tenth-acre market plot (about 33 feet by 132 feet). If farmers want to expand, they are welcome to apply for half-acre plots, available for three-year leases, through the Land Access Program housed on Johnson County Historic Poor Farm.

## Spreading the Word

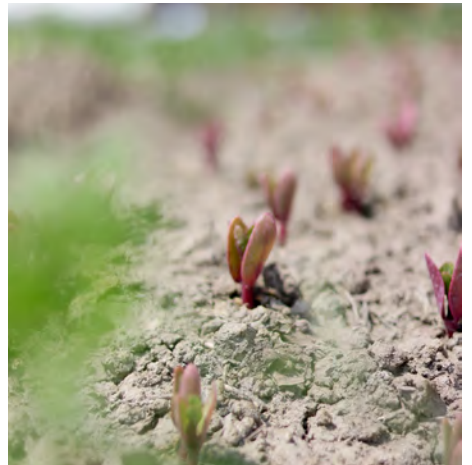
Back at Emmanuel's plot, that sunny day found him troubleshooting with another Congolese grower, Blandine Matondo, a young woman in the midst of her first growing season at GFP. She raises spinach, cucumbers, peppers, onions and sour leaf, which are young leaves from the native African roselle plant that are used in a range of traditional recipes. "It's like spinach with a sour taste," Blandine explains. "We cook it with meat."

As we walk to her garden, her face lights up as she tells us, "This is an experiment." Her entire plot is divided into six smaller square plots by trenches about 6 inches deep. "If you need to remove weeds, you need somewhere to stand," Emmanuel explains, pointing to the trench. "You won't crush your food with your feet. If it rains or if you put water in it, [the moisture] can stay in that space and put humidity in the soil."

*(Continued on page 14 →)*



*Emmanuel's vegetable plots*



*Emmanuel and Blandine*

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*“When I am [at Global Food Project], I think of home because everyone at home has a garden and grows food this way,” Emmanuel says. “Last year, we were less than 10 African families. Now we are more than 30. It is very important. It means we didn’t forget our habit and culture and how to make our food.”*

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Blandine learned about Global Food Project from Emmanuel last year when he shared his bounty with her and some other African immigrant families. He recalls what he told them. “I said, ‘Hey, this year I will bring you food,’ Emmanuel recalls. “But next year you grow your own food.” Blandine and four other Congolese families now have their own vegetable plots at GFP.

Will Kapp, an Iowa City local, started as the organization’s manager in 2021. Early in his career, Will worked on a variety of farms across the country until concluding that farming full-time wasn’t possible. “I didn’t have family land, there was no money in my family and I was not making any money at all,” Will recalls. “I was thinking ‘I really love this,’ but I didn’t feel like there was a viable path for me. So I changed gears, went back to school, got a teaching license and came back home to Iowa City.”

Will taught eighth grade language arts at Northwest Junior High School in Iowa City. “I wasn’t aware of the number of immigrants in the area until I started teaching at Northwest,” he says. “I got to know all these students from Sudanese families and other families from Africa. I was really excited to meet all of these kids from all over the world. When this opportunity came up to do a garden program with people from all over the world in Iowa City, I was immediately interested.”

In the short time Will has managed Global Food Project, interest in the program has soared. “The gardens were very small the first year I was involved,” Will says. “We had 35 gardens set up and about 20 were used by around 12 families to garden throughout the year. We have 92 gardens this year and still every day, we are getting more demand.” A big part of the growth is due to word of mouth – growers at GFP have been spreading the word to community groups and peers. This year, about 25 families are in their first growing season at GFP.

### **Finding a Home Through Gardening**

Emmanuel also learned about GFP through word of mouth – he started farming there in 2021 after learning about the project through a community group. Despite his farming upbringing, he says his first year growing crops in Iowa felt tentative. “It was a test for me,” he says. “I don’t know what I can plant here. In Africa, we don’t have snow. In [Congo], you can grow all year, but here we have a short time. I don’t know how the soil is. I tested eggplant, tomatoes, onions, okra, cucumber. I was coming here every day checking on my garden.” He’s learned more about farming in Iowa, but still visits his plot nearly every day after his workday ends at a local Amazon warehouse.

“When I am [at Global Food Project], I think of home because everyone at home has a garden and grows food this way,”

Emmanuel says. “Last year, we were less than 10 African families. Now we are more than 30. It is very important. It means we didn’t forget our habit and culture and how to make our food.” He contrasts this with what he has observed in the United States, where he says people “have only one knowledge for one thing, for one orientation.”

“That is the difference from [Congo],” he continues. “Most parents teach you everything. You go to school, but you have to know how to sell something. You have to know how to grow your own vegetables. When you have a break [from school] for one or two months, you go to the garage and learn mechanics.” Emmanuel’s philosophy of life, along with his diversity in thought, enterprise and education, bring a valuable perspective to our monoculture state.

He embodies his words by showing up for his garden and community, and his willingness to so freely share his outlook and experience. Emmanuel’s family name, Mfuankatu, means eternal life. Looking at what has grown from his garden at Global Food Project, it seems that Emmanuel’s investment in his community and Congolese traditions has a life eternal. It is a never-ending, branching, replicating form of care that lives on from generation to generation – a system where knowledge is passed from one to another, where food sustains a culture away from home and where a culture sustains the practice and knowledge of growing food from the home country.

Global Food Project has provided a much-needed landing space for growers with food philosophies and knowledge from all over the world. As Will puts it: “Often the public-facing information about GFP is that we are looking at land access, culturally relevant food and food insecurity. If you went up to any gardener here and asked them about those things, more of them would say that [GFP] is an outdoor space they feel comfortable in, that they can take their family to, that they have ownership and agency over. I think for a lot of folks who aren’t established Iowans, and who aren’t white, those spaces are hard to find.”

Emmanuel, Blandine and Will – and all the farmers growing at Global Food Project – help reveal the diversity inherent to agriculture, and why it’s vital that we ensure everyone who wishes to farm can do so. We have so much to gain and learn from growers who were taught outside of our system of agriculture – not just their farming methods, but their stories, too.

Because elsewhere, just as in Iowa, our stories, our farms and our food are inseparably linked. ■

A person wearing a hat and a plaid shirt is walking through a field of purple flowers. The field is in the foreground, and there are green trees and a blue sky in the background. The text is overlaid on a white and blue graphic at the top of the image.

# 2023 FIELD DAY Season

Sometimes society (*and social media*) leads us to believe every question has one right answer, that people are successful all on their own and that big changes happen in a finger snap. But when you're at someone's field day, you have a chance to see that even "small" changes take a lot of thought and investment. Mistakes and disasters happen. Humility, patience and support are necessary for success in the long-term. Knowing this, we don't expect people to leave a field day and change their whole farm (*though once in a blue moon that seems to happen!*).

Field days are part of the long game – curiosity, collaboration, community. No one expects a field day host to have all the answers. And when 89% of field day attendees agree with the statement "I have new questions or ideas to explore based on what I saw and heard at today's event," we are reminded how vital these events are – that when we create spaces for farmers to connect, we're helping spark thousands of small steps towards resilient farms and communities.





**Cover story page:** An attendee walks out among the showy tick-trefoil during Carl Kurtz's field day. (July 19, St. Anthony, IA) **(2)** Steve Strasheim highlights some of his equipment favorites, including his Planet Junior cultivator, flame weeder and paper pot planter, to a crowd of nearly 90 people. (June 18, Mitchell, IA) **(3)** Cathy Linker Lafrenz (pictured right) and her farm team, Brooke Baker (left) and Melissa Thompson (center), on the front porch of Cathy's on-farm store, The Summer Kitchen & Local Handmade, during her field day at Miss Effie's Flower Farm & Garden Stuff. (Aug. 6, Donahue, IA) **(4)** The whole Hepp family poses for a photo after their first field day for PFI, which also started PFI's 2023 field day season on June 9. James shared how cover crops can improve profitability. (June 9, Rockwell City, IA)





**(1)** Regina Frahm demonstrates skirting a fleece at Plaid Perch Farm. (July 8, Newton, IA) **(2)** Joe Merten (center) describes the movement of water through his farm, and how it impacted his decision to put this piece of ground into a Conservation Reserve Program pollinator mix. (Aug. 10, Austin, MN; in partnership with Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever) **(3)** Searching for endangered Topeka shiners in a restored oxbow at David and Kathy Law's field day, attendees also found a multitude of minnows. (July 12, Lohrville, IA) **(4)** PFI's senior research manager, Stefan Gailans, and Nathan Anderson, PFI board president, enjoy Neil and Elizabeth Peterson's field day during a much-needed gentle rain. (July 7, Fonda, IA) **(5)** Maury and Mary Wills' orchard-focused field day drew veteran apple growers Jerald Deal (left), Paul Rasch (center) and Dean Henry (right) – a quartet representing a potent concentration of Iowa apple production knowledge and experience. (July 18, Adel, IA) **(6)** Rachel Burke, PFI's beginning farmer engagement coordinator, and AmeriCorps member Erin Carpenter welcome guests to the field day at Steve Strasheim's Twisted River Farm on Father's Day. (June 18, Mitchell, IA) **(7)** The Hundlings' farm dog enjoyed networking during the field day. (July 8, Breda, IA) **(8)** Shelley Buffalo of the Meskwaki Tribe shared an Indigenous perspective on prairie management during a field day at Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge. (June 28, Prairie City, IA) **(9)** PFI staff members Morgan Jennings, Solveig Orngard and Taylor Hintch prepare for the next stop at Caleb Akin and Noah Wendt's field day. (June 13, Cambridge, IA; in partnership with Iowa State University Organic Agriculture Program) **(10)** A couple of curious pigs approach the camera during the Wilson family's discussion of raising outdoor pigs at West Fork Farmstead. (July 14, West Chester, IA)









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(1) Pearl the chicken patrols the patio while guests conduct an on-farm food safety scavenger hunt during a field day at Donna Warhover's Morning Glory Farm. (July 24, Mt. Vernon, IA) (2) Hannah Skates Kettler and Kurtis Kettler talk lavender in their commercial flower beds. (July 16, State Center, IA) (3) Benson tries to prevent Mable from stealing Hunter's PFI hat at Plaid Perch Farm. (July 8, Newton, IA) (4) Mitchell Hora, CEO of Continuum Ag (right), examines root nodulation in a soybean field with permanent clover cover crop that Patrick White (left) farms with his father, Chuck White (not pictured). (July 19, Spencer, IA) (5) Attendees explore the biodiversity of the prairie at Carl Kurtz's field day. (July 19, St. Anthony, IA) (6) Two attendees pause to photograph prairie plants during a field day at Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge, while the rest of the group follows Christina Gish Hill of Iowa State University's Three Sisters Project. (June 28, Prairie City, IA) (7) Attendees at Mark and Jodi Peterson's field day load up to tour the fields and talk cover crops. (Aug. 7, Craig, NE)



7



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(1) Zach Knutson discusses his cattle and grazing practices on land he's been converting from row crops to perennial pasture. (July 28, Zumbrota, MN) (2) Kent Morris talks all things tractors during the Trying Out Tools field day. (July 23, Atlantic, IA) (3) Field day attendees load up the wagon to check out a newly established windbreak during Brice and Melanie Hundling's field day. (July 8, Breda, IA) (4) Julianna Vajda chats with PFI's livestock education coordinator, Amos Johnson, during Beth Hoffman and John Hogeland's field day. (Aug. 10, Lovilia, IA) (5) Hannah Skates Kettler shares tales of damage done to her prairie strips - by both deer and toddlers. (July 16, State Center, IA) (6) Megan Sollard, conservation agronomist with Northern Country Co-op, references the field map for the CRP plantings during the Mertens' field day. (Aug. 10, Austin, MN; in partnership with Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever) (7) Dwight Rutter explains what's involved with establishing prairie habitat while extolling the benefits of prairie. (June 21, Spencer, IA; in partnership with Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever) (8) David and Kathy Law have been restoring oxbows on their land near Lohrville to provide habitat for a range of species, including the endangered Topeka shiner. (July 12, Lohrville, IA) (9) Attendees gather around Caleb Akin's custom-built combination roller-crimper and planter. (June 13, Cambridge, IA; in partnership with Iowa State University Organic Agriculture Program) (10) Cassie Kurash demonstrates her daily practice of moving chickens across pasture. (June 17, Fort Atkinson, IA)



2



# The Cycle Continues

*Longtime PFI members Steve and Sara Hopkins are innovators in regenerative farming, water conservation and youth education*

By Emma Liddle



## Beginnings

For PFI member Steve Hopkins, the story of his career path begins and ends at the Upper Iowa River. As a student at Luther College, in Decorah, Iowa, he channeled his passion for conservation into building his own major, which he called human ecology, a blend of anthropology, biology and agriculture.

After graduating, he took a job with the Center for Rural Affairs' Small Farm Resources project in Hartington, Nebraska. The year was 1985, not long before PFI's founding. Part of his work involved driving a small group of farmers to a field day at Dick and Sharon Thompson's Boone, Iowa, farm. "What they'll likely remember most is the 1972 Catalina Sedan that I drove across Iowa to get to the field days," Steve jokes. The earliest PFI members were inspirations for Steve – curious farmers trying new and different methods to improve their operations.

He moved to Wisconsin to pursue his master's degree in land resources at University of Wisconsin-Madison, but PFI continued to tug at him. While he was there, Dick and Sharon happened to speak at the university. Steve's path would soon cross with PFI's again when he coordinated the Farm 2000 project in Poweshiek County, Iowa, a role that involved bringing farmers to some of PFI's first field days. In 1988, Steve became a member, and shortly after, he and his wife, Sara Hopkins, decided to farm – and to conduct on-farm research in PFI's fledging Cooperators' Program.

## Rotations, Research, Results

In 1992, Steve and Sara returned to northeastern Iowa and began farming on about 20 rented acres of hilly permanent pasture in Winneshiek County. They raised dairy cattle with intensive rotational grazing, a concept Steve discovered through his studies and had introduced to some central Iowa farmers. At the time, the practice was uncommon in that part of the state. The Hopkinses also researched pasture growth

and nutrient density in a rotational system, with funding from PFI's Sustainable Projects and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. Their farm was one of first in northeast Iowa to use rotational grazing – making it an informal test of the new method in their area.

Rotational grazing uses the natural herding behavior of cattle, with fences instead of predators to move them. Steve and Sara divided their farm into 40 paddocks, moving the cattle twice a day to a new paddock with fresh grass and water. They wanted to rely as much on the pasture as possible, purchasing supplemental feed only when necessary. Steve was especially proud of the gravity-based portable water system that got water to nearly all his paddocks.

That system was put to the test almost immediately. In 1993, Iowa experienced 500-year flood conditions, with over 36 inches of rain in three months. Fortunately, the Hopkins farm was able to not only weather the heavy rains but take advantage of them for their operation. "For us, it grew a lot of pasture," Steve says. "Since we were small and only had 20 cows, we could get by with a relatively short rest period for each paddock."

As summer progressed, the Hopkinses were able to rely more on the pasture. Cycling through paddocks gave the pasture time to regrow with little mud, and weekly forage analysis showed that the cattle received a steady supply of nutrients. The success caught on with Steve's landlord and other PFI members. Steve held a PFI field day in August 1993, during which he showed off his system and research. Through 1994, after an early spring reliant on mainly supplemental feed, costs dipped to about half of normal. Between May and July, according to Steve's Cooperators' Program report, daily feed costs were less than \$1 per cow. As the successful trial came to a close, the growing Hopkins family set their sights on even greener pastures.



## A Cardinal Role

In October 1994, Steve and Sara bought a farm in Jasper County, in central Iowa. While they continued dairying for a few years, life began to intercede and the rotational system wasn't quite the same. "I got an off-farm job," Steve says. "Sara already had a full-time job [as a school social worker], and we were raising two toddler boys." They switched from dairy to beef cattle and began raising pastured poultry similarly to Joel Salatin. Twenty years after they began in Decorah, they left farming for good.

In 2000, Steve joined the Iowa Department of Natural Resources to help distribute loans for upgrading septic systems and private wells. His passion and skill for water conservation sent him up the DNR ranks, and in 2007, he was promoted to his current position as the nonpoint-source pollution coordinator. In this role, Steve funds and implements watershed projects around the state that reduce pollution from land runoff. Much of the funding for that work comes from EPA Section 319, a part of the Clean Water Act that funds efforts to manage nonpoint-source pollution in lakes, rivers and streams.

Steve's lasting legacy in the state is installing signs for watersheds. He chooses which creeks to promote, pays for the signs through Section 319 and has the Iowa Department of Transportation install them. With his help, over 1,200 signs have been installed in 24 counties. In areas with signs, residents are twice as likely to know about their waterways. This is important, he says, because "if people know the name of their creek, they are more likely to care about it and change their behaviors and actions to help restore it."

One of Steve's favorite sign projects was especially personal. His sons went to Newton High School, which sits next to waterway that had been known as Sewer Creek, a name with a



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*"If people know the name of their creek, they are more likely to care about it and change their behaviors and actions to help restore it."*

**- Steve Hopkins**

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sad environmental history. "Sewer Creek was the official name because it was the receiving creek for sewage," Steve says. "Who would care about that creek?" In 2016, he proposed changing the name. Jasper County Conservation Director Keri Van Zante suggested the name "Cardinal Creek," after the high school mascot.

Since the creek ran alongside the high school, Steve approached biology teacher Courtney Wolken to ask if she would consider discussing the name change with her class. Not only did they discuss the change, but the class – with Steve's help – took ownership of the project and submitted the paperwork to the United States Board on Geographic Names. When the board approved the name change, Steve installed the signs, one of which is along Interstate 80. "It's the only creek in Iowa where every road [by it] has a sign," he says.

To this day, Cardinal Creek is a source of school and community pride. Courtney uses the creek to teach about water quality and spread awareness of Iowa watersheds. "We want our children to not only know about rainforests in Brazil," Steve says, "but also the creek right outside their door in Iowa."

## Completing the Circle

Although Steve and Sara no longer farm full-time, they still believe strongly in PFI's mission and vision. Much of Steve's current work with the DNR involves farmers and landowners, including working with PFI members. "Part of PFI's challenge is to study and advocate for practices that protect our water," he says. The Hopkinses feel a kinship for PFI members and look for every opportunity to collaborate. The couple recently moved back to an acreage in Decorah near the Upper Iowa River, where they first met and began their careers. Steve still works as the nonpoint-source pollution coordinator for the Iowa DNR, based in the Canoe Creek watershed.

Steve and Sara's influence is keenly felt. Lifetime PFI members Dan and Bonnie Beard, Decorah neighbors of the Hopkinses, attended their field day in the early '90s. Inspired in part by Steve and Sara's success, the Beards opted to try rotational grazing on their own farm. Steve says Dan and Bonnie have since "far exceeded what we ever did" with innovating rotational grazing practices.

As he looks forward, Steve hopes to keep the cycle of conservation going, inspiring the next generation of conservationists to learn about and preserve their lakes, rivers and watersheds. ■



Andrew Miller

# Ventures in Organic

*The Miller and Olson families are at different stages of their organic farming experience, but their stories highlight some common challenges and sources of support.*

By Solveig Orngard



Jeff and Gayle Olson

**When Andrew Miller decided four years ago to transition his southwest Iowa farm to organic, he was motivated by a desire to restore his soils and farm according to regenerative practices. A fifth-generation farmer, Andrew began farming conventionally in 2014, raising mainly corn and soybeans on 800 acres of gently rolling hills near Silver City, Iowa, just east of the Loess Hills about 20 minutes from Council Bluffs.**

Farming with synthetic chemicals and inputs was the norm in his area. When he started farming, Andrew followed the practices he had learned – but he was constantly asking questions and seeking ways to improve. Inspired by his wife, Jelyn Miller, who has a background in healthcare and believed organic practices resulted in healthier soil, food and people, his questions about farming practices expanded and deepened.

This inquiry led to their decision to start transitioning land to organic. “One of my goals is to do whatever we can that’s within economic reason to make [the farm] more sustainable,” Andrew says. “I want to leave it better than I found it.”

Today, he and Jelyn raise a diversity of crops and livestock at A. Miller Farms, LLC, including corn, soybeans, oats and field peas; alfalfa; cattle, chickens, geese and rabbits; and pigs and goats for homestead use. They’re also working towards producing an identity-preserved organic oatmeal in the coming year, a process that ensures the crop’s unique traits are verified and traceable back to their farm. The Millers, still in the process of transitioning to organic, are working with MOSA Certified Organic to transition the farm field by field. As of the 2023 season, they have certified organic oats, cereal rye and alfalfa, which comprise about 30% of their total acres.

“I don’t have a firm rotation,” Andrew says, “but being able to incorporate small grains is critical in breaking up weed, pest and disease cycles.”

Andrew notes that the organic transition process was eased somewhat by the fact that alfalfa, a low-input crop that can also help reduce the weed seed bank, had been part of the farm’s rotation for a generation. This hasn’t eliminated the challenges of switching to organic – he’s had to learn and

experiment with other management practices. But he acknowledges how being familiar with alfalfa simplified the process a little, both logistically and economically.

He also knows there are other economic benefits to going organic, such as having more control over input costs and adding value to his crops with the certified-organic label. But he’s driven primarily by a desire to steward the land inherited from his settler great-grandfather. Switching to organic, Andrew says, pushes him “to use an ecologically driven systems approach to maintain plant and soil health rather than rely on rescue treatments when things go awry.”

## Buoyed by Supportive Networks

Roughly 225 miles straight east of the Millers’ farm, in Iowa’s southeast corner, lifetime PFI members Gayle and Jeff Olson have been organically farming for about 15 years. Their Winfield farm includes organic small grains, alfalfa, corn, soybeans and cattle on a portion of their 1,300 acres. Early PFI members, their interest in ridge-till led them to join PFI in 1989, and they quickly became rooted in a supportive network of farmers willing to share both challenges and successes.

Jeff served on PFI’s board of directors for much of his and Gayle’s first decade as PFI members, and they got to know



## Interested in transitioning your land to organic?

See a list of organic resources in the online version of this story at [practicalfarmers.org/magazine-articles](https://practicalfarmers.org/magazine-articles).

members with varying levels of organic farming experience. Steeped in that culture, the Olsons spent some years learning about organic from these farmers. Gayle also recounts one notable experience “seeing the rich quality of soil on organically farmed land.” She and Jeff decided to start transitioning some of their own land to organic, and they have been certified through Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship for the past 12 years, following their initial three-year transition.

Like the Millers, the challenges of organic transition for Gayle and Jeff were similarly eased by practices already in place on their farm. Alongside a cohort of other farmers in their area, they had previously chosen to certify their farm with the International Organization for Standardization. While ISO certification differs from organic, both processes require detailed record-keeping and an annual inspection or audit. Familiarity with how to do that paid off when the Olsons decided to venture into organics.

They were also used to keeping separate storage for 50-50 crop share rental agreements with multiple landlords, and to separate various specialty crops they were trying out – like non-GMO beans and corn, blue corn and high-starch corn, among others. Knowing how to ensure those specialty crops didn't mix meant they were prepared to keep their organic and conventional crops separate after harvest.

“Sometimes people don't realize that it's not just a three-year process to transition your land to organic. It takes different management and bookkeeping practices,” Gayle says. “If you're learning all that at the same time, it can be overwhelming. That was a big advantage we had – we didn't have to learn it all at the same time.”

While the Olsons are now more seasoned organic farmers, Gayle says PFI has remained a key source of support during the different stages of their organic farming experience. But she notes that more resources are available



Jelyn, Andrew and their children

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**“One of my goals is to do whatever we can that's within economic reason to make [the farm] more sustainable. I want to leave it better than I found it.”**

**– Andrew Miller**

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The Olsons harvesting organic barley.

today than in the past. “I think there are more people around who are doing things with organic now than there were 15 years ago,” she says. “More people you can call on and ask for advice.”

Andrew agrees that PFI has been important during his transition process. As a newer generation transitioning to organic, he has also benefitted from easy access to other online resources that were less available to the Olsons in their early years.

“I've gained knowledge through PFI's field days, webinars and email discussion groups, and have found many resources through the Rodale Institute,” Andrew says, referring to the nonprofit dedicated to organic research, training and education. He has also found social media, specifically various Facebook groups, to be a helpful space to connect

with farmers and learn from their experiences.

## A Change of Mindset

Despite the spread of organic farms, both the Olsons and the Millers are no strangers to criticism. On one side of the spectrum, Gayle says organic growers “are often looked upon as less-than and not as up-to-date.” On the other end, they face pressure to have a 100% organic operation. “Some people just treat organics as the only way to go,” Jeff says. “And we would like to be doing that, but we don't have enough people and farmers to do it right.”

Andrew has had a similar experience. “[Organic] means so much to so many people,” he says. “Some look at you like you're crazy, and then there are people that say ‘wow, that's really cool.’”

Some of the doubt comes from the farmers themselves – many thinking of going organic worry about potentially negative changes to the land and crops. Andrew, however, argues those doubts can be overcome with a change in perspective. “The biggest change is probably within my own mindset,” he says. “How I look to solve problems, how I understand nutrient cycling and how I better understand synthetics and their effects on the soil.”

He adds that the process of transitioning some of his land to organic and learning how to manage it has pushed him to become a better farmer in his conventional production practices as well. Gayle echoes that sentiment. “We have way too many chemicals in our world that we don't understand well enough – on their own, let alone in combination with others,” she says. “Contributing as little to that as possible I think is a good thing.”

Andrew sees organic farming as an opportunity to experiment, learn and grow alongside the crops. “It used to be that I would go out and plant, spray, combine and then be done,” he says. With a chuckle, he adds, “It's kind of fun to break up the monotony. I wanted to make farming fun again!” ■

# Creating a House *for Nature*

Ken Fawcett and his family have embraced precision conservation to improve their farm while making space for the rest of nature to thrive.

By Vanya North

## Ken Fawcett, of Springdale, Iowa, has a deep connection to the ground he and his family farm.

His great-grandfather, Thomas Fawcett, settled in Springdale in 1852. Now an unincorporated hamlet, the area was originally settled by Quakers and used as a waystation on the Underground Railroad. At the time of Thomas' arrival, a small but thriving Main Street had been established, and Thomas opened a lucrative general store. By 1865, he had purchased the first 100 acres of the now 360-acre family farm.

"The general store was successful. We still have the ledgers of people that came and traded with him or what they bought," Ken says. "That first 100 acres came from that prosperity. In the 1950s, my dad and uncle were able to add another 200 acres. The last 60 acres was purchased by myself right before the farm crisis in the '80s, but we stuck it out, and are still here."

Spurred on by the rich farmland and economic opportunities that mid-19th century Iowa presented, Thomas, along with other hopefuls from east of the Mississippi River, settled onto a landscape consisting mainly of native tallgrass prairie. Though just a fraction

of a percent of that original prairie remains today, Thomas' descendants have found ways to honor both their farming heritage and the Iowa landscape through a variety of conservation practices on their farm.

"Farming has been my career and my passion," Ken says. "This farm has been a part of me my entire life, and my family's lives, since the 1850s. In that time, it has gone through several transformations, but the conservation taking place now moves it back in a way to that original prairie that Thomas first encountered."

## Evolving a Stewardship Ethic

Today, Ken Fawcett is continuing the farming legacy started by his great-grandfather by operating a thriving corn and soybean farm in the original location where Thomas settled 170 years ago. Ken grew up walking the bean rows, bringing in the corn harvest and watching the seasons pass. He recalls one spring thunderstorm from his childhood that highlighted the importance of conservation in agriculture.

"I vividly remember May 21, 1957. That day, I stood near the middle branch of Watson Creek after a violent thunderstorm and watched torrents of muddy water carrying our soil and seed and fertilizer off the farm," Ken says.



Ken Fawcett

"Seeing the eroded soil leaving our farm, and the autumn profits with it, was a powerful lesson to me as a young boy of 8."

Ken knew from then on that maximum profit in any farm venture is important, but equally important are the soil and natural resources that go into nourishing the crops on which farmers' livelihoods depend. When he took over managing the farm in the '80s, a slow transition from traditional row cropping began, and what Ken describes as "a slow evolution of stewardship." He began with cover crops to limit soil erosion in his corn and bean fields, with an emphasis on maintaining yields and profits.

"In '85, we started hand-planting trees along the gully to stabilize the creek bank," he says. "Then it just kept going from there."





This definite boundary between the Fawcetts' row crops and saturated buffers illustrates the "precision" in precision conservation.

## Embracing Precision Conservation

The Fawcetts started using precision conservation to increase the soil, water and habitat quality of their land. With this approach, farmers use a range of technologies and techniques – such as GPS, remote sensing, yield maps and other tools – to identify marginal or consistently low-yielding areas of farmland. These acres, which usually lose money for the farmer, are then taken out of crop production and used for targeted conservation practices like prairie plantings, wetlands or saturated buffers.

Farmers typically place the marginal acres into federal programs like the Conservation Reserve Program, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency, or the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, administered by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. Both offer incentive payments that, combined with cost savings on seed, fertilizer and other inputs, generate a positive net return on those acres – as well as better overall yield averages for the whole field.

Farmers using precision conservation also profit from the knowledge that they're helping to care for the soil and water while providing habitat for wildlife and beneficial insects. These are the main reasons Ken and his family were inspired to use precision conservation in their fields. After deciding to try this approach, the next step was deciding which acres to remove from production. On any farm, that decision requires careful analysis.

Today's technologies let farmers and their service providers study a field in

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*I really embraced the technology of conservation . . . . Ensuring that you can still make a living while preserving and improving the environment is key."*

**– Ken Fawcett**

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exquisite depth – down to the inch – to understand the land's patterns and history. This precision has a range of benefits. Farmers can get the most profit from the land that remains cropped and, depending on which acres are removed and the farmer's goals, they can maximize habitat. Ken says this detailed analysis has been one of his favorite parts of his ongoing conservation efforts.

"I really embraced the technology of conservation. We worked with NRCS and various ag organizations using GPS and remote sensing to really get a sense of how much crop to keep and how much to set aside, down to practically the centimeter," Ken says. "Ensuring that you can still make a living while preserving and improving the environment is key, and all these new technologies are great for that."

### Creating a Home for All

The Fawcett farmscape is showing how it's possible for farmers to realize both profit and preservation. Since first embarking on intentional habitat work in 1985, the Fawcetts have installed a pond that is home to several varieties of fish, including rainbow trout; planted 14 acres of prairie strips; and added 25 total acres

of buffer strips along the creek that runs through their farm. They have also planted over 15,000 trees, mostly by hand.

"This land has been a labor of love. We still have family reunions where all the descendants of Thomas Fawcett still come here to gather and catch up, no matter where they live now," Ken says. "Preserving this land has been about preserving that family legacy as well as the land. And just like families can have ups and downs, the conservation has had its share of setbacks as well, but we pushed through because the legacy of the land is what is important."

One such setback was the introduction of Palmer amaranth, a weedy plant native to the U.S. southwest, that got mixed in with the prairie seed the Fawcetts used to establish their prairie strips. Fortunately, Palmer amaranth struggled to survive in Iowa's climate and the invasive weed didn't thrive in the field. But the Fawcetts have struggled with other invasive species, such as reed canary grass and the emerald ash borer, which has infected many of the ash trees Ken and his family planted by hand years ago.

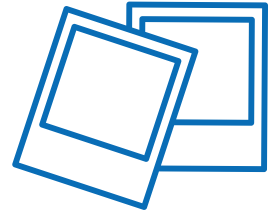
"Conservation is a learning process. When we established our cover crops or planted our prairie strips, we had to learn, and sometimes we made mistakes or nature had other ideas," Ken says. "But we kept learning and adapting, caring for this land like a family member.

"A farmer's land is their most treasured asset. It needs to be tended and respected. It needs to not only house their family, but all of nature as well. We share this land with birds, deer, fox and even an otter. It's their home too." ■

# PFI MEMBER

## Photo Album

This section features photos taken by PFI members. Whether you're a farmer, landowner or a non-farmer, we invite you to share your images of the everyday, the awe-inspiring or the curiously beautiful from your farm or community; we'll work to curate them into the album.



Haze over the hay bales. (Ellen Walsh Rosmann – Rosmann Family Farm, Harlan, IA)



The Super M puts her best foot forward for the parade, with Kevin and the kids. (Kevin Ballman – Ballman Farms, Red Wing, MN)



A crew of high school volunteers gets their sneakers dirty prepping for beans at Tapestry Farms. (Ann McGlynn – Tapestry Farms, Davenport, IA)



Despite drought, Cox's Orange Pippin apples grow on a young tree in July. (Jerry Fottrall – Plum Creek Orchard, Swisher, IA)



The herd takes a hike. (Susan Kasal Young, Lucky Star Farm, Iowa City, IA)



Front-door storm-watching in July. (Danelle Myer, One Farm, Logan, IA)



Yellow prairie coneflower blooms in a young pollinator plot, planted three years ago in memory of Jim Sayer's parents and younger brother. (Jim Sayers, Humbolt, IA)



As they say... make hay when the sun shines! (Vic Madsen, Madsen Stock Farm, Audubon, IA)



A chicken heads for the humid cover of fresh pasture. (Harriett Dickey-Chasins, Raccoon Forks Farm, Redfield, IA)



Have a photo you'd like featured in the magazine?  
Email it to [liz.kolbe@practicalfarmers.org](mailto:liz.kolbe@practicalfarmers.org) or tag PFI on social media and let us know!

# Review of “Tending Iowa’s Land: Pathways to a Sustainable Future”

Reviewed By Carol Smith

**As I read “Tending Iowa’s Land: Pathways to a Sustainable Future,”** a collection of essays edited by Cornelia Mutel and featuring writings by several PFI members, I reflected on the interesting words chosen for the title of a book about Iowa’s land.

Consider “tending,” which means “to take care of, watch over or be in charge of, manage or operate,” or “pay attention to and do what is necessary to keep in good condition.” This word introduces us to the central question the book explores: How do we apply information to create a practical form of action? The word “pathways” reflects how Cornelia has chosen to frame the huge task of making a sustainable future for Iowa’s agriculture.

The book is organized into sections based around four pathways: soil, water, air and life. They speak to the crucial nature of these components, and how we can think about approaching the changes we need to make to move into that sustainable (and regenerative) future. We do indeed “make a path by walking.” Each section includes chapters by people recognized as experts in their field, who help ground readers in the science and data connected to each pathway.

Their insights are complemented by personal reflections from farmers and others – people who are already walking the path to a regenerative future. This on-the-ground experience shows readers how they too can embark on the path to sustainability. Paired with the scientific background, these how-to insights suggest ways we can act to change the future. What’s clear is that it will take everyone’s cooperation,

collaboration and commitment. But these authors also point out that the efforts of many individuals make a difference. So does building outside connections, especially with consumers. These writers show that when scientists, policymakers and the public join hands in support, problems can be addressed.

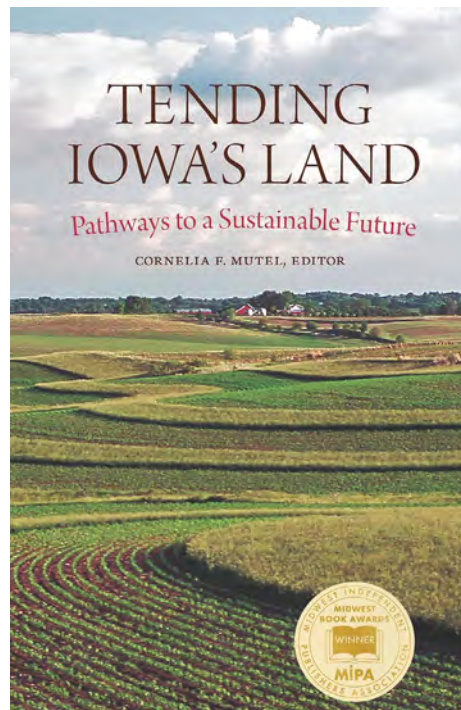
Despite the apparent segmentation within the book, “Tending Iowa’s Land” offers readers a chance to see commonalities that thread through and connect the different pathways – including how the science can help guide us towards the future. Four commonalities especially stood out to me. First, we already have the technologies and methods we need to move to a sustainable future. Second, for all four pathways, we are at a crossroads, and we can choose a better future. The biggest challenge, however, is perhaps societal will: The path is well lit and

open, but will we take it? Finally, creating a sustainable future for our soil, water, air and life requires partnerships and collective vision.

My professional experience with bringing people together in communities to support action tells me that the first step is always listening to each other. By reading the information and conversations in this book, we can start finding ways to talk to each other. It’s my belief that when we’re open to learning from each other, we create the connections and networks needed to make those collective decisions that will help lead us, together, on the path to a sustainable, regenerative future. ■

*Carol Richardson Smith and her husband, Bob, are longtime members and friends of PFI. They live west of Perry, Iowa, on an acreage with three perennial gardens, a vegetable garden and a huge raised bed that becomes a low tunnel-cold frame in winter.*

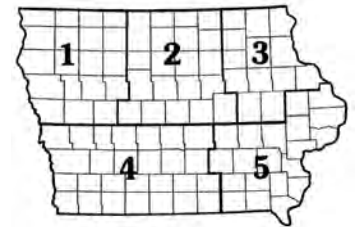
*Carol has a background in vocational and adult education and extension, participatory process design and program management. Much of her work in the last 20 years has focused on local food and the agriculture that supports it. Bob is a Master Gardener who has also managed co-ops and built a small business assembling ag equipment.*





# Welcome, New Members!

From May 18, 2023–August 8, 2023



## DISTRICT 1 - NORTHWEST

- Diego Mordhorst – Ute
- Raquel Nelson – Aurelia
- Scott Osborn – Cherokee
- Michael Sexton – Rockwell City
- Calvin and Krissy Thiessen – Spirit Lake
- Adam Weber – Danbury

## DISTRICT 2 - NORTH CENTRAL

- Andrew Arends – Alexander
- Lisa Breja – State Center
- Scott Harmer – Jefferson
- Cody and Marena Henkle – Grafton
- Caleb Pokorny – Fort Dodge
- Jim Ure – Jefferson

## DISTRICT 3 - NORTHEAST

- Brian Bieber – Waukon
- Daniel Brincks – Waucoma
- Adam Foulk – La Porte City
- Kevin Hoeger – Manchester
- Todd Kaeser – Monona
- Michael Kluesner – Farley
- Lori Lane – Cedar Rapids
- Sheila and Tracy Merfeld – Durango
- Marcella and Lee Roe – Cascade
- Dexter Shaffer – Central City
- Michael and Nathan Smith – Anamosa
- Ross and Heather Steinbronn – Waterloo
- Justin and Leanne Wehling – Waverly

## DISTRICT 4 - SOUTHWEST

- Andrea Boyd – West Des Moines
  - Laurie Fenimore – Mitchellville
  - Katie Gilbert – Milo
  - Aaron and Erin Hardee – Bedford
  - Barb and Rich Heki – Johnston
  - Thomas Monroe – Grimes
  - Beth and James Romer – Altoona
  - Jake Sternberg – Carson
  - Chris Terlouw – Killduff
  - Brian Thielges – Urbandale
- ## DISTRICT 5 - SOUTHEAST
- Paul Hoppman – Bellevue
  - Doug Hull – Ottumwa
  - DeWayne Klouda – Solon
  - Olivia and Curt Pacha – Brighton
  - S & L Peterson Farms LLC, Michael Wacker – Sabula

## DISTRICT 6 - OUT OF STATE

- Toni Flood – Maricopa, AZ
- Jon Freedlund – Winnebago, IL
- Rachel Irvine – Bloomington, IN
- Darrin and Jennifer Arveson – Trail, MN
- Eric Blaha – Verndale, MN
- Roger Hommerding – Watkins, MN
- Dana Jokela – Cannon Falls, MN
- Josh Kelm – Faribault, MN
- Bryan and Alicia Kroll – Brook Park, MN

- Gary Thyren – Hastings, MN
- Jason Wisniewski – Ivanhoe, MN
- Keith Carlson – Gothenburg, NE
- Brian Doerr – Osmond, NE
- Samuel Fischer – Maywood, NE
- Quinn Johnson – Whitney, NE
- Steve Kampfe – Valley, NE
- John Krueger – Roca, NE
- Ross Montgomery – Superior, NE
- Mike Rasmussen – Ericson, NE
- Garrett Ruskamp – Dodge, NE
- Spencer Anderson – Hager City, WI
- Andy Ascher – Whitewater, WI
- Eric Bechel – Durand, WI
- Michael Dolan – Spring Green, WI
- Clifford McGrath – Evansville, WI

*Thank you*  
to our newest lifetime member!

**Gina Nichols**  
Paonia, CO

Lifetime membership is open to anyone, and confers the same benefits as regular membership – without any renewal notices! Learn more about this option at [practicalfarmers.org/lifetime-membership](https://practicalfarmers.org/lifetime-membership).



New members Calvin and Krissy Thiessen (here with their children) hosted a field day on Sept. 6 at their farm in Spirit Lake, Iowa.

# Meet the Newest Members of PFI's Team

## Heather Brown | Grants Finance Manager



Heather Brown joined Practical Farmers of Iowa in August 2023 as the grants finance manager. In this role, she oversees staff and contractors who code and enter financial data related to grants; analyzes grant budgets and expense dates; and reports results to grant project managers and funders.

Heather attended Morningside University in Sioux City, Iowa, where she received a bachelor's degree in business administration with an

emphasis in finance and accounting. Before PFI, Heather worked as a grants accountant at a local nonprofit. There, she specialized in local, state, federal and fee-for-service grants and contracts and collaborated with a variety of program managers and funders across the state to ensure proper accounting oversight on all grant funding.

Heather resides in rural Ames, Iowa, with her two girls and three dogs. In her free time, you can find her in the garden picking vegetables to can or at the lake with family fishing, boating and hiking. ■

## Natasha Hegmann | Senior Horticulture and Local Foods Coordinator



Natasha Hegmann joined Practical Farmers of Iowa as the senior horticulture and local foods coordinator in June 2023. In this role, she develops partnerships and supports farmers to grow PFI's local foods viability programs.

Natasha also runs Turkey River Farm near her hometown of Elkader, Iowa, where she and her husband grow vegetables for their 100-member CSA. Before starting her farm in 2015, Natasha served with FoodCorps in rural Montana and then managed vegetable production for the University

of Montana Dining Services. Her experience with farm-to-school programming and building a farm business inspires her to imagine a future for rural Iowa with more table-food producers, stable local markets for crops and fresh foods in school cafeterias.

Natasha serves on the Clayton County Conservation Board and is caretaker of the Deep Mountain Retreat Center. She holds a bachelor's degree in Spanish from St. Olaf College. In her free time, Natasha enjoys hiking, taking on ambitious cooking projects, sharing farm life with her son and plotting their family's next travel adventures. ■

## Get Cover Cropping Insights With Our New Video Series



PFI has been a key resource for farmers on cover crops since its founding, with field days, conference sessions, research reports, magazine articles and more. This year, we're adding a dedicated video series – “Practical Cover Croppers” – to the mix.

The series launched earlier this summer with a video on setting up a corn planter for planting into a green cover crop. At three to 10 minutes long, each video aims to offer a digestible snapshot of PFI members' cover cropping practices and insights across a range of farm enterprises, from row crops and livestock to horticulture.

You'll learn about topics like using cover crops to suppress weeds, prevent erosion, boost soil health and provide forage for livestock. Videos also explore the societal benefits of cover crops and offer detailed how-tos on specific topics like roller crimping, air seeding, grazing cover crops and more.

New episodes are published weekly on our YouTube channel: [youtube.com/@practicalfarmers](https://www.youtube.com/@practicalfarmers). Subscribe to our channel to be notified when we publish a new video. For questions, contact Rachel Deutmeyer at [rachel.deutmeyer@practicalfarmers.org](mailto:rachel.deutmeyer@practicalfarmers.org).

## Joshua McCunn | Graphic Design and Photography Intern



Joshua McCunn joined Practical Farmers of Iowa in June 2023 as a graphic design and photography intern. In this role, Joshua will be assisting the senior graphic design and photography coordinator with graphic design duties and photographing various events.

Joshua is a senior at Iowa State University. In fall 2023, he'll graduate with a bachelor's degree in fine arts in graphic design with two minors in advertisement and illustration. While at Iowa State, Joshua was involved with Trend Magazine, serving as the

head photographer and as part of the graphic design team. Joshua also worked as the graphic designer for CyLaunch, a partnership with Iowa State University and NASA for aerospace engineering students to build and launch rockets.

Outside of school, Joshua is involved with the community by helping with Amazing Grace's Lemonade Race, which is a nonprofit that has raised \$138,000 for Blank Children's Hospital. Joshua was born and raised in Ames, Iowa, and in his free time he likes to draw and has had his artwork shown in the gallery at the Ames-based Octagon Center for the Arts. ■

## Kyleigh Meyeres | Office Assistant



Kyleigh Meyeres joined Practical Farmers of Iowa in June 2023 as an office assistant. In this role, Kyleigh assists with a variety of projects, including front office activities, data collection and coordinating the welcome committee for new members of PFI.

Kyleigh is a senior at Iowa State University. In spring 2024, she will graduate with a Bachelor of Science in technical communication and a minor in English, with a focus on grant writing and nonprofit organizational structure. Throughout her time at ISU, she has been a show team member of the ISU Western Equestrian Team, competing around the Midwest under the Western horsemanship discipline.

During the summer of 2023, Kyleigh will complete her emergency medical technician certification to become an EMT and serve the community in her free time. Kyleigh is also an ambassador of the First Responders Children's Foundation based in New York City, where she helps to support the children and families of first responders who have been killed or injured in the line of duty.

Kyleigh grew up between the cornfields of Maquoketa, Iowa, and the mountains of Livingston, Montana. Growing up in a first-responder family, Kyleigh knew that she wanted to learn how to give back and serve her community. In her free time, you will find Kyleigh riding her horse, walking her dogs, going on outdoor adventures or reading a book in her hammock. ■

*Note  
Our New  
Location!*

# Save the Date!

## PFI's 2024 Annual Conference

Jan. 18-20

Iowa Events Center | 730 3rd St. | Des Moines, IA

Join us for three days of learning, sharing knowledge and building connections to foster resilient farms and communities.

Visit [practicalfarmers.org/annual-conference](https://practicalfarmers.org/annual-conference) for updates.



## CALENDAR



# PFI Field Days

Find out more at [practicalfarmers.org/field-days](https://practicalfarmers.org/field-days).

## OCTOBER

OCTOBER 6 • HONEY CREEK

Mushroom Cultivation, Marketing and Tasting

*Hosted by Kevin Novak | Flavor Country Farm*

## NOVEMBER

NOVEMBER 18 • PANORA

Milling and Marketing Small Grains Through Multiple Channels

*Hosted by Jeff Hafner & Earl Hafner | Early Morning Harvest*



# Other PFI Events

## OCTOBER

OCTOBER 28 • *In Spanish* • A Year in the Life of a Poultry

Producer – Preparing for Winter

*Hosted by Carlos Williams, Sundog Farm*

Solon, IA | [practicalfarmers.org/agricultores-latinos](https://practicalfarmers.org/agricultores-latinos)

## NOVEMBER

NOVEMBER 2 • *In Spanish* • A Year in the Life of a Poultry

Producer: Marketing & Markets | Online | [practicalfarmers.org/agricultores-latinos](https://practicalfarmers.org/agricultores-latinos)

NOVEMBER 9 • *In Spanish* • A Year in the Life of a Poultry

Producer: Biosecurity | Online | [practicalfarmers.org/agricultores-latinos](https://practicalfarmers.org/agricultores-latinos)

NOVEMBER 16 • *In Spanish* • A Year in the Life of a Poultry

Producer: FSA Loans, Legal Requirements & Issues | Online |

[practicalfarmers.org/agricultores-latinos](https://practicalfarmers.org/agricultores-latinos)

## DECEMBER

DECEMBER 14–15 • AMES

Cooperators' Meeting | Contact Stefan at [stefan.gailans@practicalfarmers.org](mailto:stefan.gailans@practicalfarmers.org) |

[practicalfarmers.org/cooperators-meeting](https://practicalfarmers.org/cooperators-meeting)



# Find PFI At

## OCTOBER

OCTOBER 7–9 • Women, Food & Ag Network Annual Conference

Ames, IA | [Learn more at wfan.org/2023wfanconference](https://wfan.org/2023wfanconference)

## NOVEMBER

NOVEMBER 3–4 • Emerging Farmers Conference

St. Croix, MN | [Learn more at emergingfarmers.org](https://emergingfarmers.org)

NOVEMBER 14 • Central Nebraska Regenerative Ag Conference

Holdrege, NE | [Learn more at cfra.org/central-nebraska-regenerative-ag-conference](https://cfra.org/central-nebraska-regenerative-ag-conference)

NOVEMBER 26–27 • Iowa Organic Conference

Iowa City, IA | [Learn more at regcytes.extension.iastate.edu/iowaorganic](https://regcytes.extension.iastate.edu/iowaorganic)

## DECEMBER

DECEMBER 11–13 • The Big Soil Health Event

Cedar Falls, IA | [Learn more at agsoilregen.com/bigsoilhealth](https://agsoilregen.com/bigsoilhealth)

# PFI Current Enrollments

From October–December

## COVER CROP COST-SHARE

SIGN-UP DEADLINE: DEC. 1, 2023

[practicalfarmers.org/cover-crop-cost-share](https://practicalfarmers.org/cover-crop-cost-share)

## CONSERVATION COST-SHARE

ROLLING APPLICATION

[practicalfarmers.org/wildlife-conservation-cost-share](https://practicalfarmers.org/wildlife-conservation-cost-share)

## BENEFICIAL BUGS COST-SHARE

ROLLING APPLICATION

[practicalfarmers.org/beneficial-insect-cost-share](https://practicalfarmers.org/beneficial-insect-cost-share)

## LANDOWNER COACHING PROGRAM

ROLLING APPLICATION

[practicalfarmers.org/landowner-coaching](https://practicalfarmers.org/landowner-coaching)

## LOCAL FOODS PURCHASE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

ROLLING APPLICATION

Sign up to be a vendor at [iowalfpa.org/producers](https://iowalfpa.org/producers)

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Keep an eye out for announcements on the following programs:

## SMALL GRAINS COST-SHARE

APPLICATIONS WILL OPEN IN NOVEMBER 2023 FOR THE 2024 HARVEST SEASON

[practicalfarmers.org/small-grains-cost-share](https://practicalfarmers.org/small-grains-cost-share)

## SAVINGS INCENTIVE PROGRAM

APPLICATIONS WILL OPEN IN OCTOBER FOR OUR NEXT CLASS

[practicalfarmers.org/savings-incentive-program](https://practicalfarmers.org/savings-incentive-program)

## LABOR4LEARNING PROGRAM

APPLICATIONS FOR TRAINERS WILL OPEN IN OCTOBER

[practicalfarmers.org/labor4learning-trainers-2023](https://practicalfarmers.org/labor4learning-trainers-2023)

## PRODUCE SAFETY COST-SHARE

APPLICATIONS WILL OPEN LATE FALL

[practicalfarmers.org/produce-safety-cost-share](https://practicalfarmers.org/produce-safety-cost-share)



Ross Kurash (right) shares his knowledge of cover crops and no-till farming at the field day he hosted on his farm in Fort Atkinson, Iowa.

# GROW YOUR FARM WITH PRACTICAL FARMERS. JOIN OR RENEW TODAY!

Want to join or renew online? Visit [practicalfarmers.org/join-or-renew](http://practicalfarmers.org/join-or-renew).

## MEMBER INFORMATION

Contact Name(s)\*: \_\_\_\_\_

Farm or Organization Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_ County: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

\* For Farm or Household membership, please list names of all persons included. For Organization membership, you may list up to three contact persons.

## JOIN OR RENEW

### 1. I am joining at the level of:

- Access - \$25
- Individual - \$50
- Farm or Household - \$60
- Organization - \$110
- Lifetime Member\* - \$1,200  
\* See details at [bit.ly/PFI-lifetime](http://bit.ly/PFI-lifetime)

### 3. How many years of farming experience do you have?

- 0
- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11 or more

### 2. Which category best describes you? (choose one)

- Farmer or farm operator
- Not farming yet, but would like to
- Farmland owner who does not actively farm myself
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### 4. How did you hear about PFI?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## MEMBER BENEFITS

**When you join our email discussion groups, you can network, build community and exchange ideas from anywhere, at any time. Sign up for as many groups as you'd like (and be sure to include your email address above)!**

- Announcements
- Perspectives
- Field Crops
- Horticulture
- Livestock

### Please add my farm to PFI's:

- Local Foods Directory
- Business Directory (Organization members only)

## SUSTAIN PRACTICAL FARMERS WITH AN ADDITIONAL DONATION

**For the sake of the long-term health and vitality of Practical Farmers of Iowa, we ask you to consider making a donation above and beyond your membership fee.** Practical Farmers of Iowa is a 501(c)3 organization. Your gift is tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

### I would like to make a one-time, tax-deductible donation to PFI in the amount of:

- \$1,200
- \$500
- \$250
- \$100
- \$50
- \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**Or, make a recurring monthly or quarterly donation.** This will be automatically charged to your credit card on the first day of each month or quarter.

- Yes, I would like to give \$ \_\_\_\_\_
- per month
- OR
- per quarter

## PAYMENT

Membership Level .....\$ \_\_\_\_\_ per year for \_\_\_\_\_ year(s) = \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Additional Donation ..... = \$ \_\_\_\_\_

TOTAL AMOUNT ..... = \$ \_\_\_\_\_

- Check or money order is enclosed (Please make payable to "Practical Farmers of Iowa.")
- Credit card (Visa, MasterCard or Discover only)

Name on card \_\_\_\_\_ Number \_\_\_\_\_

Exp. Date \_\_\_\_\_ CVC# (3 digits) \_\_\_\_\_  Please automatically charge this credit card annually for membership



# CALL FOR ON-FARM RESEARCH COOPERATORS!

## CORN FARMERS:

### Come put soil health and nitrogen fertilizer to the test

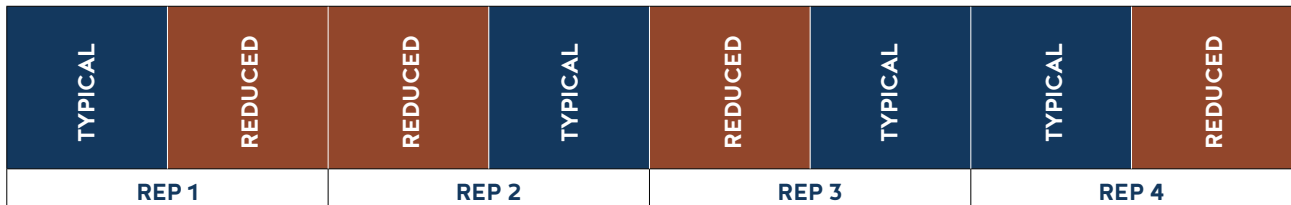
Recent research suggests that biologically healthy soils need less fertilizer. If you've been working to improve your soil health, we think you can reduce nitrogen to corn without sacrificing yield.

**Who can participate?** We're looking for corn farmers in Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska and Wisconsin. Eligible fields will have at least a five-year history of soil health practices (*cover crops, diverse rotations, integrated grazing, reduced tillage, etc.*).

**What's involved?** You will compare two N-fertilizer rates applied to corn in a replicated strip trial. One of the rates will be your typical N-rate and the other rate will be a reduced rate of your choosing. (*For instance, a typical rate of 170 lb N/ac vs. a reduced rate of 120 lb N/ac*). You may achieve the N-rates with any N sources and application timings of your choosing.

**The research setup:** You'll plant 8 treatment strips that are about 2 acres each. Four strips (~8 acres) will receive the typical rate, and four strips (~8 acres) will receive the reduced rate.

**Total trial footprint:  
~16 acres**



### Why participate?

- You'll receive a \$1,000 research participation fee for completing the trial. Receive \$2,000 if you also include a third treatment which involves no fertilizer application (0 lb N/ac). Receive \$250 if you choose to include only a single check-strip.
- You'll learn more about fertilizer use in corn on your farm.
- You will contribute vital data to a broader effort by PFI and partners to gauge risk associated with reducing N fertilizer.

### Why is this important?

If we can reduce our reliance on N fertilizer...

- We can improve water quality.
- We can improve agriculture's carbon footprint.
- We can improve our farms' bottom lines.

**Do you want to put your soil health to the test? Do you want to join a community of curious and creative farmers who take a scientific approach to improving their farms?**

Contact PFI's senior research manager, Stefan Gailans, at [stefan.gailans@practicalfarmers.org](mailto:stefan.gailans@practicalfarmers.org)

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Non-Profit  
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U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Waterloo, IA  
Permit No. 901

## Apple Picking Season

As summer turns into autumn, apples continue to ripen and many varieties are ready to harvest. For farmers, there are numerous factors that go into choosing which varieties to grow. Read more about the apple market on page 8.

